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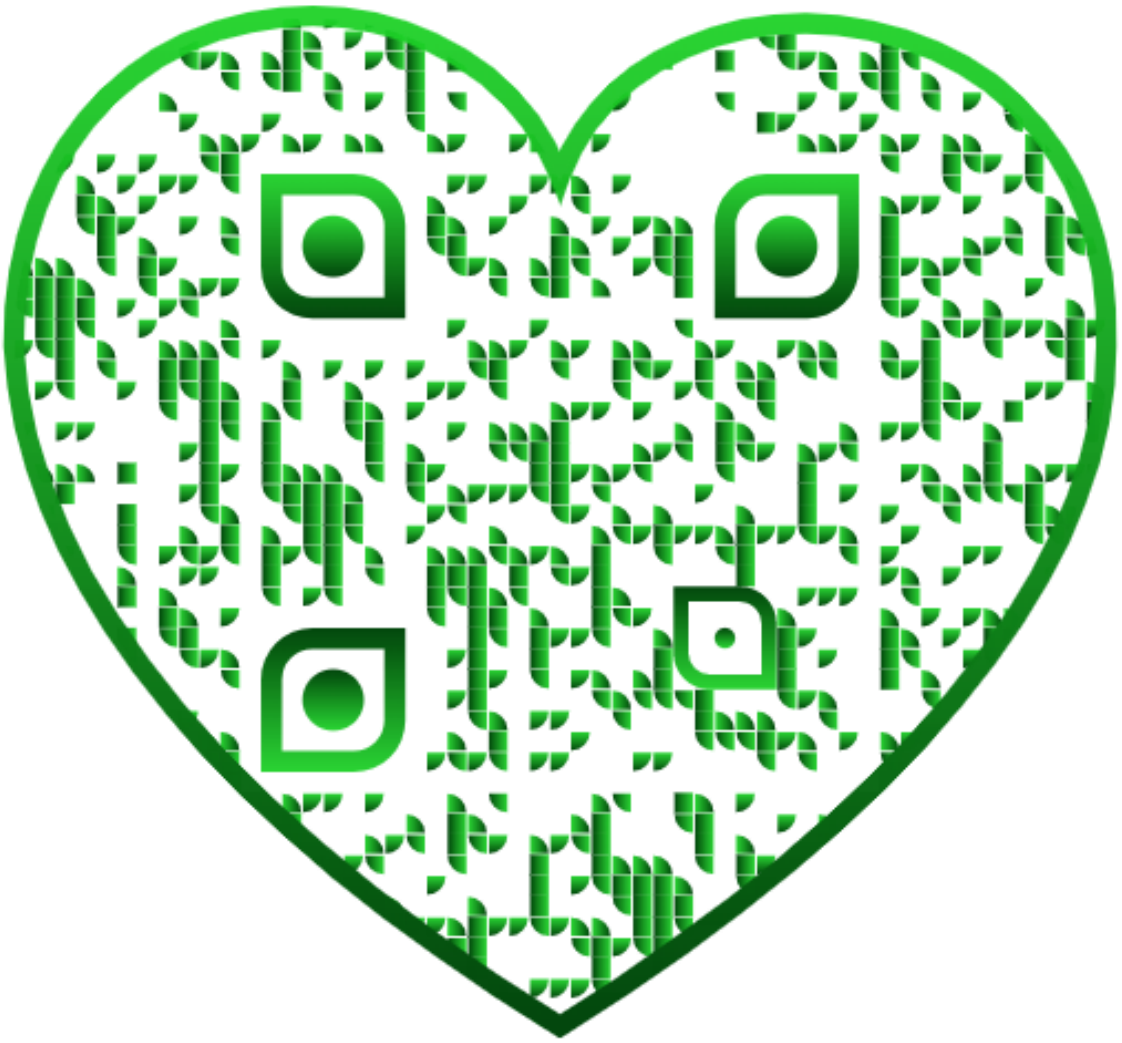

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From competitions to education

Competitions have been described as a necessary evil. In a perfect world we probably wouldn't need them, yet they have helped to launch the careers of many major pianists. While it seems likely that the careers of Maurizio Pollini, Martha Argerich and Krystian Zimerman would have thrived even without their winning the Chopin Competition, the immediate exposure and resulting DG contracts (for Pollini and Zimerman a least; Argerich had already made her debut recording when she won in Warsaw) certainly helped to pave their path. But there were fewer competitions then, and they seemed to mean more. Indeed, in some cases high-profile competition failure was enough to secure a following – think of Youri Egorov (Van Cliburn Competition, 1977), Ivo Pogorelich (Chopin Competition, 1980) and Piotr Anderszewski (Leeds Competition, 1990). Some musicians transcend competition success, even if the exposure helps.

Is his comment piece on page 10 Bryce Morrison offers a personal reflection on the vagaries of the competition circuit. Whatever one thinks of them, it was a competition that unearthed the extraordinary talent of Yunchan Lim – our cover artist this issue, who won the Cliburn Competition last year. Another Cliburn winner, Haochen Zhang, who won in 2009, will feature on the cover of our next issue. To what extent these pianists benefited from their competition success is perhaps moot – there are famous pianists who have never won a competition, as well as forgotten pianists with strings of such victories – but for these artists the profile that came with winning these competitions is of immediate value. What they do next is up to them.

On a more personal note, recent university visits have left me thinking about the state of music education, both at school and university. For years leading universities have been closing music departments or reshaping the courses that these departments offer. They continue to be under threat. The state of music in primary and secondary education lies at the root of this. But while this hugely important issue goes beyond the remit of magazines like ours, I believe we have a significant role to play: if formal music education continues to have increasingly restricted aims, it seems even more imperative for us to fly the flag for critically engaged and responsive listening, and for informed and accessible writing. We will always need new generations of readers, and of writers.

Tim Parry, *Editor*

International Piano offers a rich mix of inspiration and guidance to pianists and piano fans around the world, from dedicated amateurs and students to professional pianists, teachers and aficionados.

Celebrating the piano in all its forms, including the fortepiano and digital keyboards, each edition of our magazine is packed with interviews, features, news and reviews showcasing the top artists of today and yesteryear. Practical advice for players runs the gamut from articles on technique and repertoire to learning resources and study courses, plus the latest developments in piano technology.

Our goal is to draw together the fascinating strands that make the piano such a popular instrument, enhancing every reader's knowledge and supporting those who strive to master its challenges.

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International Piano *meets* Clare Hammond

PHILIP GATWARD

Who were your principal teachers?
Ronan O'Hora, Anne Queffélec, Bernard Roberts and Brenda May.

Beyond your teachers, who have been the biggest musical influences on you?
My colleagues, whether pianists, other instrumentalists or singers – I learn so much from listening to others.

If you could take just one recording to a desert island, what would it be?
Monteverdi's *Madrigali Guerrieri et Amorosi* with La Capella Reial de Catalunya and Jordi Savall.

What was your most recent musical discovery?
Kaija Saariaho's *Laterna Magica*.

What was the last thing you were practising?
Three of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's *24 Negro Melodies*.

Which solo piece would you most love to learn but haven't yet got around to playing?
Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Which piano concertos should be heard in concert more often?
Doreen Carwithen's *Concerto for Piano and Strings* and Grace Williams's *Sinfonia Concertante*.

Which composers are the most underrated or wrongly neglected?
Elizabeth Maconchy, Grażyna Bacewicz and Elsa Barraine.

What are the major works you're playing over the coming months?
Ravel's *Miroirs*, Unsuk Chin's *Six Études* and Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata.

Do you have a personal favourite of your own recordings?
I really dislike listening to my recordings, unless I made them so long ago that I no longer recognise my own playing.

My husband has agreed to answer as proxy – his is my album of études by Hélène de Montgeroult.

If you could have another go at making a recording, which would you choose?
I don't think I could bear to remake a disc. The recording process is so draining and, at some stage, you just have to accept the limitations of the instrument, the acoustic and the human body. To have to revisit that would be enormously challenging and, anyway, there is so much wonderful new music to explore!

Tom Borrow wins the Terence Judd-Hallé Award

The Israeli pianist Tom Borrow has been announced as this year's winner of the Terence Judd-Hallé Award. This award, in partnership with the BBC Radio 3 New Generation Artists scheme, provides opportunities for exceptional young musicians on the brink of an international career to reach their full potential, with an outstanding young pianist approaching the end of the scheme selected by the BBC.

The English pianist Terence Judd died in 1979 at the age of just 22, and subsequently a trust was established in his name and an award has been presented in association with the Hallé for over 40 years. Notable past recipients include Sir Stephen Hough, Nikolai Lugansky, Elisabeth Brauss and last year's beneficiary, Alexander Gadjiev. As part of the prize, Tom Borrow makes his debut with the Hallé with five concerts during 21-25 February 2024, in Manchester, Hanley and Sheffield, playing Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto.

David Butcher, Chief Executive of the Hallé, said: 'We are thrilled to welcome BBC New Generation Artist Tom Borrow as the latest recipient of the Terence Judd-Hallé Award which honours the memory of one of this country's finest young pianists. The award is also a significant addition to our thriving broadcast partnership with BBC Radio 3.'

Tom Borrow wins a prestigious award

Tom Borrow said: 'I am so thrilled and honoured to receive the Terence Judd-Hallé Award. All the more since this award is in memory of a truly distinguished pianist whose ideals I hope to live up to, and is given by an orchestra whose reputation for superb musicianship is known internationally. And what could be better than to have the opportunity to play with the Hallé at The Bridgewater Hall, in chamber music with its musicians, and even in a recital at the Manchester Mid-Day Concert Series? There could be nothing more encouraging to a young pianist than all of this, and I feel very thankful and, again, deeply honoured.'

Amateur pianists thrive in Paris

The history of the piano is not merely the history of virtuosos, its power has also been in the hands of the amateurs, the nameless thousands who bought the latest sonatas and fantasies, as well as instruments, to practise like mad in the front room. Gérard Bekerman, professor of economics at the Sorbonne, is their champion and his annual competition in Paris for 'Grands Amateurs de Piano' held its 31st event early in April; the winner will play a concerto in Paris on 5 October. The standard was as ever bewilderingly high, defying the dividing line, but the final this year was distinguished by the unusual fact that no warhorse was heard twice (or more!); nor was Liszt's B minor Sonata heard at all.

The six finalists oddly included only one from the Far East, a political analysist from Japan, but the usual predominance of techy, maths-like or medical experts prevailed – Zachary Weiner, a computing engineer from Google in San Francisco, won both Jury and Press prizes, playing Bach and Rzewski's *The People United Will Never Be Defeated*, itself unusual in this context. He will play Bernstein's *The Age of Anxiety* (Symphony No 2), for piano and orchestra, at the Sorbonne on 5 October, and the 2022 winner, Pierre Watrin, will play the Grieg Concerto. Second place and the Public Prize went to Cesare Antonio Grassi, a taxi driver from Rome. He played two appropriate tone poems: Liszt's *Jeux d'eau à la Villa d'Este* and Chopin's Second Scherzo, possibly an evocation of the traffic in the Eternal City … Sleeves-up, all, for next year.

Jonathon Brown

pianoamateurs.com/en/

Looking ahead to the London Piano Festival

The eighth London Piano Festival takes place at Kings Place on 5-8 October, once again with *International Piano* its media partner. Founded by pianists Katya Apekisheva and Charles Owen in 2016, the London Piano Festival has featured artists including Alfred Brendel, Alexandra Dariescu, Julian Joseph, Gabriela Montero, Stephen Kovacevich, Jason Rebello and Kathryn Stott, among many others. This year's line-up features Danny Driver, Clare Hammond, Vadym Kholodenko, Leszek Możdżer and Lucy Parham, as well as Katya Apekisheva and Charles Owen of course.

Apekisheva and Owen open this year's Festival on 5 October with a four-hands programme celebrating their longstanding collaboration as performers and co-Artistic Directors. They also celebrate the 150th anniversary of Rachmaninov's birth by performing both of the Suites Nos 1 and 2 for two pianos as well as the composer's final work, the *Symphonic Dances*. Also on this programme is Eleanor Alberga's *Two-Piano Suite*, written to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Jamaica's independence in 1987.

The following day, Friday 6 October, sees the long-awaited festival debut – and Kings Place debut – of the 2013 Van Cliburn winner Vadym Kholodenko, who was scheduled to appear in the 2020 festival, which like so much live music-making fell victim to the pandemic. Kholodenko's programme centres on three popular piano composers – Beethoven, Liszt and Haydn – and also features Thomas Adès's magical soundscape *Traced Overhead* and Valentyn Silvestrov's *Bagatelles*.

At noon on 7 October, the British pianists Danny Driver and Clare Hammond – both featured elsewhere in this issue of *IP* – join forces with Charles Owen and Katya Apekisheva for 'Ligeti Plus', a programme in honour of the centenary of the composer's birth, exploring music by Ligeti and associated composers including his star pupil, Unsuk Chin, and inspiration, Conlon Nancarrow. Following this, Danny Driver will run a dedicated masterclass focusing on Ligeti's Études, supported by Help Musicians. Completing a marathon day, for those attending the whole event, Hall One of Kings Place will host the Polish jazz pianist, composer and producer Leszek Możdżer for a solo improvised set – a continuation of the London Piano Festival's established association with jazz.

JEAN-BAPTISTE-MILLOT

Vadym Kholodenko makes his London Piano Festival debut

The following morning, on Sunday 8 October, the festival closes with 'Elégie – Rachmaninoff, A Heart in Exile' from British pianist Lucy Parham, which originally premiered at Kings Place in 2016. Actor Tim McInnerny narrates Rachmaninov's trajectory from his youth in Russia to his self-imposed exile in 1917 and his death in California in 1943 with verbal content from letters and diaries alongside evocative solo piano pieces from Rachmaninov and his contemporaries.

Co-Artistic Directors Katya Apekisheva and Charles Owen commented: 'We are delighted to return to the beautiful space at Kings Place to present our eighth edition of exceptional piano recitals and masterclasses. There is a particular focus this year on the legacy of Rachmaninov and Ligeti in honour of their respective 150- and 100-year anniversaries. We hope that this year's programme will encourage audiences and musicians alike to engage with familiar and new music in novel ways.'

STUDIO NEWS

Earlier this year, **Cordelia Williams** recorded an album of Beethoven, Schumann and Prokofiev at the Turner Sims concert hall in Southampton. Combining Beethoven's Op 126 Bagatelles, Schumann's *Waldszenen* and Prokofiev's *Visions fugitives*, this diverse programme of miniatures will be available on Somm in September.

The second instalment of **Angela Hewitt**'s Mozart piano sonatas is due from Hyperion this autumn, a two-disc set including six sonatas (K310, K311 and K330-333) alongside two Fantasias (K396 and K397), following a set of the early piano sonatas that was welcomed in these pages by Bryce Morrison earlier this year (January/February issue).

Leon McCawley has been in Menuhin Hall, Stoke d'Abernon, to record an album of popular encores, including evergreen favourites such as Sinding's 'Rustle of Spring', Grieg's 'To Spring' (the last of the Op 43 *Lyric Pieces*), Tchaikovsky's 'Autumn Song' (October from *The Seasons*) and Rachmaninov's own arrangement of his song 'Daisies'. This album will be issued on Somm in November.

Tiffany Poon, who became something of a social media and YouTube phenomenon during the period of Covid lockdowns, has recorded an all-Schumann album for Pentatone. Tracing a journey that reflects Schumann's multifaceted psyche and the dual aspects of his personality, this album features three ever-popular works from the composer's youthful burst of solo-piano creativity: *Kinderszenen*, *Davisdbündlertänze* and the *Arabeske*. Look out for this release early next year.

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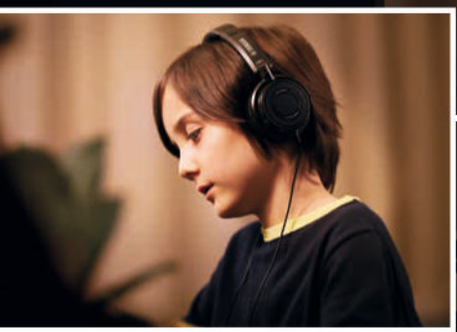

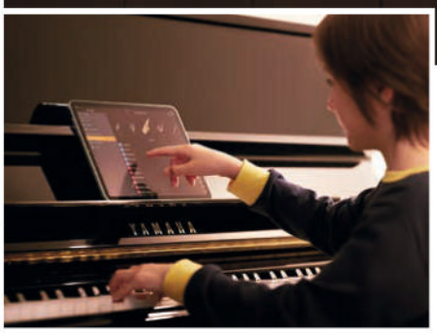

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IN BLACK AND WHITE

On competitions

A route to success for some, a curse for others, pleasingly irrelevant for a few, competitions are increasingly ubiquitous. **Bryce Morrison** shares some reflections

Who can resist the allure of the competition circuit? Even for initially doubting pianists, the temptation of lavish rewards, both financial and promotional, can shine like a light in darkness promising a leap from obscurity to fame and fortune. For an audience, who would not want to be present at the start of richly enduring and developing careers? Experiencing the launch of the careers of, say, Argerich, Gilels, Perahia and Pollini (first prize winners all) is to become part of musical history.

It may seem churlish, with such potential riches in store, to remind those who work in the music profession, especially those who teach and judge, of things that only the complacent or evasive would ignore. Competitions, once a litmus test of success, have long been under fire. Bartók famously said that competitions are 'for horses, not artists', and others have decried the attempt to rank something as subjective as artistic performance. When an official at the Rubinstein Competition stated as a precondition of success that 'all the notes are there, 100 per cent: perfection is required and nothing else will be forgiven or tolerated,' there was widespread derision. This notion of 'perfection' smacks of the inhuman and robotic, and provides fuel to those who view the competition scene as fundamentally anti-musical.

It is increasingly recognised that while a competition is only as good as its competitors, it is also only as good as its jury. Compiling a suitable jury is no easy task. 'Star' pianists, for example, do not necessarily make star judges. Their celebrity and status add lustre to competitions anxious for recognition and prestige. But their capacity for reasoned and objective judgement is open to question. Great performers achieve their stature through

Great artists temporarily convince you that theirs is the only point of view

an essential narrowness of vision, and although their eloquence and conviction and above all their personal charisma (the qualities of a Cortot, Moiseiwitsch or Richter) are popularly believed to derive from a breadth of culture and generosity of spirit, the reverse is often true. Many of us will recall Rosalyn Tureck's zero mark for András Schiff's Bach at the Leeds Competition in 1975, or Halina Czerny-Stefańska's abrupt dismissal of a pianist who had the temerity to offer Busoni's *Variations on a Chopin Prelude*, exclaiming 'I cannot take seriously a pianist who plays music like that'. Sitting next to Lazar Berman at a competition was a dispiriting experience as he slept, snoring loudly throughout the performance before waking, his ticks reserved exclusively for Russian pianists. Dmitri Bashkirov, too, with his tendency to talk loudly during a performance – 'this bit Horowitz plays good' or, conversely, 'this bit Horowitz plays not so good' – hardly offered a model of attentive and responsible listening. Then there was Vladimir Ashkenazy at the Concours Géza Anda: angry at the result, he demanded a re-vote, telling those of us on the jury that we had simply got things wrong, a denial of a necessarily democratic procedure. His storming out of the competition in the wake of Mrs Anda's annoyance left a bitter taste all round.

More generally, great artists temporarily convince you that theirs is the only point of view, a powerful illusion deriving from an inseparable mixture of genius and egotism. Such artists can be, at best, idiosyncratic judges of others. Rachmaninov's bleak dismissal of Cortot as 'inaccurate' is scarcely less chilling than Cortot's dismissal of Rachmaninov as 'passé'. Does Emil Gilels's description of his compatriot Sviatoslav Richter as 'the policeman of pianists' (a barbed reference to Richter's sometimes metronomic severity) do justice to that artist's range and complexity? Claudio Arrau's comments in Joseph Horowitz's book *Conversations with Arrau* hardly show the courtesy and humanity for which he was celebrated, and Rubinstein's sniping attack on Horowitz ('Horowitz is a great pianist, but I am the finer musician') suggests a transparent and aggressive agenda. These examples suggest an incapacity to enter into other states of being, to realise that great art relies on many and various approaches for its full creative nourishment. A specialist in, say, Bach or Chopin can be a poor judge of their performance by others. Expertise can carry strong preconceptions and even a tendency to view a successful foray into jealously guarded territory as an act of presumption.

Then there are teachers, who often make up the residue of a jury. Academics sometimes impose academic standards, but the private and conservative ethos of the examination room is alien to the public and outgoing life of the concert hall. Alfred Brendel admirably defined playing of genius as: 'Playing which is at once correct and bold. Its correctness tells us: that is how it has to be. Its boldness presents us with a surprising and overwhelming realisation: what we thought impossible becomes true.' Such a view is a far cry from mere accuracy, taste and discretion, slim virtues

when set beside intensity, passion, colour and the personal flair of the born re-creator and public performer – those lucky few who, in the words of Julius Katchen, are able to communicate emotion fluently to an audience.

Many teachers are remarkably ill-informed about repertoire. To hear Fanny Waterman say to Adam Skoumal (a gifted competitor) 'you shouldn't play music like that; it's not good', referring to Janáček's Piano Sonata and Schumann's *Allegro* in B minor, was chastening. I also recall Nicole Henriot-Schweitzer's contempt for a pianist at the Santander Competition who offered Liszt's étude 'Il lamento' rather than more familiar fare. Then there are notorious quid pro quo arrangements (you vote for my student and I'll vote for yours), which are far from uncommon. The Russian pianist and teacher Sergei Dorensky once approached me at a competition saying that I must come to Moscow to teach, adding the implied proviso 'you don't kill my boy'. When his young Russian pupil was later voted out by a near unanimous decision, any question of an invitation to Moscow predictably vanished. Some judges vote exclusively for pianists of their own nationality. At the Vianna da Motta Competition one year the jury's votes were published in a local paper, and an Italian judge's votes were seen to go exclusively to Italian pianists.

In truth, informed assessment is rarely easy. The maximum number of performances heard in the minimum time blunts one's responses and blurs one's critical focus. A bad performance immediately following a good one can seem unduly poor, and conversely a good performance following a bad one can come across as unduly brilliant. Either way, all judgements, subjective in their nature, are easily influenced by their context. The competition arena is demanding for everyone, particularly in acoustically problematic halls where perceiving the finest details can be especially challenging. Was that performance of, say, Ravel's 'Ondine', with its opening syncopated shimmer of harmony, accurate or confused? This can become a near impossibility in some settings – I recall the late Ingrid Haebler's appearances and disappearances as she sought a satisfactory place to listen as a jury member of the Leeds Competition in the city's Town Hall.

Bruce Liu burst on to the music scene by winning the International Chopin Piano Competition in 2021

While the atmosphere at piano competitions can be festive and intense, jurors must be aware of their responsibility to young artists. Up to a point they hold their futures in their hands. So, the reader may well ask, what makes the ideal juror? If such a person exists, this is someone with a wide knowledge of both repertoire and performance, capable of casting their prejudices and preconceptions aside – capable, that is, of embracing the spirit of a performer's outlook or point of view. I warm to Wanda Landowska's response to Glenn Gould's performance of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. For her it was simultaneously hateful and wonderful. More personally, I have not forgotten my experience at the 1993 Ivo Pogorelich International Piano Competition where the late Irina Zaritskaya (who took second prize to Pollini at the 1960 International Chopin Piano Competition) was among my colleagues. As I listened to an extraordinarily novel and re-creative performance of Prokofiev's Seventh Sonata I feared that her response, given her training within the Russian tradition, would be critical and unaccepting. On the contrary, she exclaimed in wonder at the quality of the performance ('not how we play Prokofiev in Russia, but something so special and characterful'). I later flung my arms round her in delight, only to receive a mock-reproving look – 'you think I am some narrow-minded, provincial bore?' This lightened a fraught competition that ignited some of us in fury when the chair, Alisa Kezheradze (Pogorelich's wife), announced that she would veto and alter any jury decision she disagreed with.

If a competitor's success is not to degenerate into professional failure it is important to realise that winning a competition is merely the first rung of a very tall ladder. Consolidating and capitalising on such success presents its own challenges, requiring ability, artistry and determination. All of us are familiar with talents that burn brightly before rapidly fading, as artists fall victim to premature exposure and sometimes unscrupulous management. Neither Mozart nor Liszt were strangers to such exploitation, and although they would not necessarily have been better composers if their early years had not been driven by such incessant promotion and personal burden, they would surely have been happier men. Finally, if these words seem unduly sobering, I can only add that they are written without cynicism but in a spirit of healthy and necessary scepticism. **IP**

TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

Ingrid Haebler: an obituary

A stylish Mozartian with an extensive discography has died

Ingrid Haebler, the Austrian pianist known primarily for her recordings of Mozart and the Viennese classics, has died at the age of 93 – although some sources give an earlier birth year of 1926, which would have made her 96. Haebler was born in Vienna but raised in Poland from the age of three to 10; she went on to study in Vienna, as well as in Salzburg, Geneva (with Nikita Magaloff) and Paris (with Marguerite Long).

Although her repertoire ranged far wider, from Bach to Ravel, Haebler was best known for her tasteful and contained playing of Mozart, Schubert, Haydn and Beethoven. She recorded vast swathes of Mozart for Vox, before recording a second set of all the Mozart piano concertos for Philips, with the LSO under Galliera, Rowicki and Colin Davis. For Philips she also recorded all of Mozart's piano sonatas, Schubert's completed piano sonatas, both books of Impromptus and other works, many of Haydn's piano sonatas, and the complete violin sonatas of Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert with her duo partner Henryk Szeryng. Among the highlights of Haebler's concert career were three appearances at the BBC Proms, all featuring Mozart: in 1960 she played the C minor Concerto, K491 (with her own cadenza), in 1965 she played the B flat major Concerto, K450, and her last appearance in 1988 presented the final concerto, in B flat major, K595.

Haebler's choice of repertoire from the outputs of later composers – among them Schumann (*Kinderszenen*, *Papillons*), Chopin (the waltzes) and Ravel (the *Sonatine*) – reinforce the modest intimacy of her playing. Always lucid and refined, she did not embrace a style of playing that was overflowing with temperament or personality; in an age increasingly dominated by higher-voltage virtuosos, Haebler's gently cultivated pianism highlighted very different virtues. Although she was highly respected, her place in Philips' Great Pianists of the 20th Century series came as a surprise to many. She was often regarded as the 'house pianist' of the Philips label, especially in her favoured Viennese repertoire, at least until Alfred Brendel and Mitsuko Uchida covered much of the same territory. In 2022 Decca released Haebler's complete Philips recordings, set down since 1953, in a 58-disc box-set.

Ingrid Haebler
Born 20 June 1929; died 14 May 2023

LETTERS

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COUNTING THE COST OF CONCERTS

I greatly enjoy Charivari's column and his often-irreverent take on things. I found myself agreeing with much of what Charivari says regarding concert programmes in the May issue ('Ill-Tempered Clavier', page 14) – I also like to hear a variety of music in a single concert, from the profoundly serious to the glitteringly frivolous. But I have to take issue over complaints about the cost. The £30 Charivari mentions seems a bargain when you consider the degree of expertise and years of study that have led to the musician(s) being on stage, especially when you think what it costs to go to almost any West End show or to have a meal in a nice restaurant. And – too late for me, sadly, and I'm guessing for Charivari too – so many venues offer cheap tickets to students and the under-35s. We might have a lot of things to complain about, but the cost of live classical music isn't one of them.

Angus Hamilton *via email*

Sometime in the '70s or early '80s the BBC aired a series of television programmes featuring the jazz virtuoso Oscar Peterson. Each week there was a 'special guest' who was interviewed by the host, and who then performed. I vividly remember one week it was a pianist I had never heard of – Jorge Bolet. One thing Bolet said in that interview that has stayed with me was 'I never practise. If I told you how much I practise, I wouldn't get any concerts'. This must have been prior to the Decca recordings and the sudden propulsion of Bolet's career in the 1980s.

I have tried to find this clip many times via the internet, but to no avail. If anyone has information about where I might be able to find it, I would be most grateful.

Dane Preece *via email*

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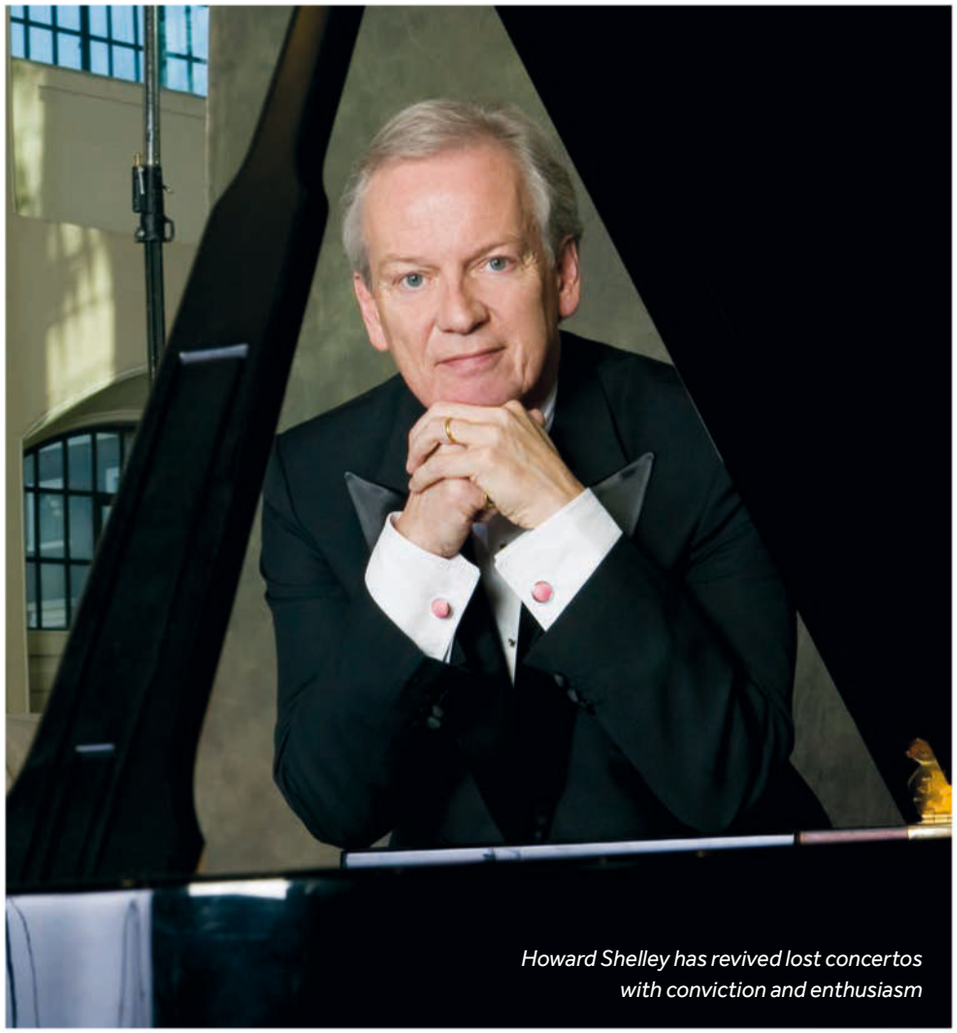
The *Ill-Tempered* Clavier

The piano concerto repertoire is wider than we hear in the concert hall. **Charivari** hails the joys of long-forgotten music as well as an inspirational champion of so many neglected works

Howard Shelley is the doyen of his generation of British pianists. I've been thinking about his concerto recordings – for a reason that I'll come to later. This column has often lamented the lack of concerto repertoire heard in the concert hall.



ERIC RICHMOND

Howard Shelley has revived lost concertos with conviction and enthusiasm

Risk-averse promoters, with little knowledge of what is out there; incurious pianists afraid to champion the unknown and forgotten; conductors who do not want to spend valuable rehearsal time on an unfamiliar concerto when there is the more pressing task of telling the players how he wants Beethoven's Fifth Symphony to be played …

Many pianists have secret guilty pleasures. I mean by that, of course, the music that they have learnt for their own satisfaction and enjoyment in the full knowledge that they are unlikely ever to be asked to play it in public. One recalls the famous story of Earl Wild being rung by the conductor Erich Leinsdorf in 1968. Did he happen to know the B flat minor Piano Concerto of Xaver Scharwenka? Wild's response? 'I've been waiting for someone to ask me that question for the last 40 years.' He had studied the work with the Scharwenka pupil Selmar Janson in 1928. Wild toured the concerto all over the world for the next 20 years.

Most *International Piano* readers will be familiar with Hyperion's groundbreaking Romantic Piano Concerto series begun in the early 1990s, guided by Mike Spring under the auspices of the late Ted Perry and now approaching its 90th iteration. The list of discoveries unearthed by this means is a long one indeed. Dismayingly few of them, though, have transitioned from the studio to the concert hall, the vast majority learnt by the pianist specially for the recording, before returning the score to its dusty shelf to be forgotten again. Perhaps things are better in the US and Europe, but it is rare in the UK to have performances of concertos by, say,

Paderewski, Reinecke or the aforementioned Scharwenka.

It's all too easy – or should that be lazy? – to programme one of the 'five' Beethoven concertos (hello! – there are others by him), Tchaikovsky's No 1 (ditto), Grieg, Schumann, Chopin's Nos 1 and 2 and Rachmaninov's Nos 2 and 3. I can count on the fingers of two hands the number of non-standard repertoire concertos programmed in London in the past two decades. Among these I would count Stephen Hough playing Hummel's A minor Concerto (a welcome revival of his superb recording with the composer's B minor Concerto for Chandos), although I would have to add Finghin Collins with Stanford's C minor (at the BBC Proms in 2008), Sergio Tiempo and Gustavo Dudamel in Ginastera's Piano Concerto (an electrifying performance recently repeated with the Berlin Phil to the same effect), and Howard Shelley with the London Mozart Players programming concertos by Cramer, Hummel and Moscheles alongside Saint-Saëns, Mozart and Mendelssohn.

These suggest possible ways to move forwards and break the deadlock: mix the familiar with the unknown (by which I don't mean mixing the familiar Grieg with the premiere of some discordant bit of contemporary excrescence); adopt the model of a subscription concert series so that even when an unfamiliar piano concerto is advertised – with perhaps the potential of losing an audience – the financial risk is less (subscription series, too, tend to have audiences who come through loyalty and are more open to trying new things); hope that a star pianist, the kind that can call the shots, becomes enthusiastic over one of these forgotten works and decides to champion it.

But back to Shelley. Long ago, he decided that playing solo recitals was not for him. What got his juices going was directing from the keyboard (as well as, let it not be forgotten, from the podium) and assembling, playing and conducting performing editions of lesser-known Classical and Romantic piano concertos. The number of these that, through him, we might otherwise never have encountered is jaw-dropping.

There is a particular reason for mentioning him: I have discovered that he, more than almost any other pianist, is the most wonderful companion for a long car journey. Over the past two years I have not gone on any trip without a Shelley concerto to listen to. They are simply life-enhancing, even when (or, rather, especially when) stuck in a 10-mile tailback. Not all the works are masterpieces by any means, but Shelley can convince you otherwise. His apparently effortless dexterity in negotiating impossibly difficult passagework while leading the orchestra will have you conducting all the way up the motorway. It really is one of life's great pleasures. Try it: the two by Benedict (particular favourites, I learn, of HM King Charles), Herz, Kalkbrenner, Czerny, Sterndale Bennett, Pixis, Potter, Godard … and who knows, we might get to hear one of them played by someone in a live concert one day. Oh wait. Is that a pig I see flying high in the sky? **IP**

LISA-MARIE MAZZUCCO

Yunchan Lim combines technical flair with a poetic sensibility rare in so young a pianist

The whole world in his hands

When Yunchan Lim became the youngest-ever winner of the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition last year, he launched a major career with a string of unforgettable performances. **Jed Distler**, whose daily blog on the competition for our sister-title Gramophone was widely followed, reports on a young pianist of exceptional promise

I first encountered Yunchan Lim, as I suspect most piano mavens around the world did, while watching the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition's 16th edition online, live from Fort Worth, Texas. His preliminary round stood out for some of the most stylish and elegant Couperin and Mozart pianism I'd ever heard, topped by an agile and rhythmically vivacious account of Chopin's Variations on 'Là ci darem la mano', Op 2. Small wonder that a YouTube viewer described Lim as 'a 40-year-old in an 18-year-old body'. Naturally, Yunchan Lim made it to the quarter-finals, where he offered a smartly programmed and superbly delivered

set containing the Three-Part Ricercar from Bach's *The Musical Offering*, Scriabin's Second Sonata and Beethoven's *Eroica* Variations.

After sailing through to the next round, the announcement that Lim planned to devote his entire semi-final recital to Liszt's complete *Transcendental Études* created a stir throughout the international piano community. Could this youngest of the 2022 Cliburn finalists successfully bring off such an audacious test of technical wherewithal, musicianship and stamina? The answer was a most emphatic, unambiguous 'yes'! Lim's astonishing yet intelligent virtuosity and his total immersion in Liszt's idiom truly defined 'transcendental'. He launched into the opening 'Preludio' while the audience was still applauding, and tossed of the second étude's broken double notes and unwieldy leaps without breaking sweat. I have never heard 'Mazeppa' played with such minimal bluster and maximum nobility, not to mention interlocking octaves in 'Wilde Jagd' that made Cziffra's signature trick sound arthritic by comparison.

This live performance is now being issued on the Steinway & Sons label, both on CD and on streaming platforms – Yunchan Lim's first recording, with the promise of a debut studio album still in the future. Listening again to this musical and technical tour de force it is clear that, even when new recordings of Liszt's *Transcendental Études* seem to be issued every other month, this is an account to be placed alongside any personal favourites one might have, whether by Lazar Berman, Claudio Arrau, Bertrand Chamayou or countless others, as a benchmark reference version, the vivid music-making caught in the inspired heat of the moment.

In retrospect, this Liszt performance was just a warm-up act for what one online commentator called 'The Rach 3 heard round the world'. Not since the heyday of Vladimir Horowitz and Van Cliburn himself has a performance of Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No 3 become the talk of the town, with the entire piano community weighing in, from 11 million-plus YouTube viewers and seasoned pros to the Cliburn jury itself. Perhaps no one enjoyed the performance more than its conductor, Marin Alsop, who also headed the jury. 'He's a musician way beyond his years,' she told *The New York Times*. 'Technically, he's phenomenal, and the colours and dynamics are phenomenal. He's incredibly musical and seems like a very old soul. It's really quite something.'

Yet when Lim visited me for coffee not long after the competition (along with silver medallist Anna Geniushene, bronze medallist Dmytro Choni and the Cliburn's director of communications and digital content Maggie Estes), he expressed dissatisfaction with his Rachmaninov, saying that he hardly played up to his full potential. While most competitors would give their eye teeth to attain Lim's overnight success and acclaim, the young pianist seemed unfazed by the spotlight. More than once he mentioned his fantasy of buying property in the mountains, away from the public, where he could work in isolation to his heart's content.

LISA-MARIE MAZZUCCO

Yunchan Lim (right) with his fellow Cliburn Competition medallists Anna Geniushene and Dmytro Choni

'I've been exposed to music since I was born,' Lim told me recently in a follow-up interview we conducted over email. 'We had a CD player at home and my parents always played a variety of music, even though they were not musicians at all. So I've enjoyed collecting records since then and now I have an enormous collection of them.' He began piano lessons at the age of seven, and only one year later participated in his first competition. 'The piece I played in that competition was Chopin's Waltz in B minor, Op 69 No 2. At that time, my first teacher, Ms Kim Kyung Eun, recommended that I listen to recordings by Evgeny Kissin and Sergey Rachmaninov. Looking back now, it seems like starting my musical life with Kissin and Rachmaninov was a divine intervention.' From there Lim delved further into the Russian school, absorbing recorded performances by Heinrich Neuhaus, Stanislav Neuhaus, Vladimir Sofronitsky and Maria Yudina. He also cites Alfred Cortot, Ignaz Friedman, Edwin Fischer and Artur Schnabel as major influences, not to mention the impact of Carlos Kleiber, Sergiu Celibidache, the Quartetto Italiano and Jussi Björling.

'Lim's astonishing yet intelligent virtuosity and his total immersion in Liszt's idiom truly defined "transcendental"'

Lim is also quick to mention the influence of his teacher Minsoo Sohn, who recognised his teenage student's extraordinary potential. 'At first he was a little bit cautious', Sohn told *The New York Times*, 'but I immediately noticed that he was a huge talent. He's very humble, a student of the score and he isn't over-expressive.'

The one-year delay of the Cliburn Competition due to the pandemic made it possible for Lim to qualify when he turned 18. At his teacher's suggestion, Lim gave it a try. Once the pianist arrived in Fort Worth, with his mother in tow, he prepared like an athlete, putting

RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

Yunchan Lim's thrilling performances at the Cliburn Competition won over audience and jury alike

in as many as 20 hours into a practice day, fuelled by proteins and carbohydrates. Proper balance and alignment between mind and body is important to Lim. Perhaps this accounted for the generally outward calm and expressive economy of his platform demeanour during the solo rounds, in contrast to the gesticulations, facial grimaces and other physical mannerisms typical of so many competition practitioners. But then, in his recent performance of Rachmaninov's Third Concerto for his debut with the New York Philharmonic, critic Zachary Woolfe observed the pianist's upper body 'jackknifing toward the keys at flourishes, with his left foot stomping'.

Lim's Cliburn victory launched a steady stream of recital and concerto engagements on four continents over the past year. Discussing Lim's Tokyo debut in February, playing Beethoven's *Emperor* Concerto under Mikhail Pletnev's leadership, the critic Nahoko Gotoh wrote: 'From the opening solo bars, [Lim] captivated the audience with his elegance and assuredness of a veteran pianist; the *leggiermente* passages were crisp and light, but he could also produce weightiness, for example in the development section. There were some breathtakingly lyrical moments in the slow movement, followed by pretty speedy and nimble playing in the finale.'

Interestingly, Lim chose a relatively chaste programme for his UK debut recital at London's Wigmore Hall in January. The recital remains available for online viewing, and such a radical shift in direction and perspective helps to broaden our understanding of his range and musicianship. The first half is taken up by William Byrd's arrangement of John Dowland's *Pavana Lachrymae* and Bach's Three-Part Sinfonias (or Inventions), BWV787-801, which Lim presented in his own running order. The sheer beauty of sound and the unforced clarity that Lim brings to the contrapuntal textures represents the kind of undemonstrative control that doesn't sound virtuosic on the surface, yet can be achieved only by a true virtuoso. You'll notice how he draws out the tension in the Bach F minor Sinfonia's chromatic harmony through touch and timbre alone, which is easier said than done. In the all-Beethoven second half, his vividly characterised performance of the Op 33 Bagatelles leaves no detail unaccounted for, yet never lapses into fussiness or exaggeration. Some of his faster tempos in the Op 35 *Eroica* Variations rush from the starting gate like unbridled puppies freed from their cages, but you can't deny the pianist's sheer joy in the music's humorous touches.

To get a fuller sense of Lim's poetic gifts, listen on YouTube to his rivetingly spacious and songful rendition of Brahms's A major Intermezzo, Op 118 No 2. This reinforces the impression I gained hearing Lim in concert last autumn: his performance of Brahms's Four Ballades, Op 10, offered masterclasses in spacing, proportion and long-range planning, and was matched by atmospheric, unselfregarding readings of the two Liszt *Légendes* and a Mendelssohn Fantasy in F sharp minor, Op 28, that bypassed the piano en route to the music.

That Lim clearly does not follow the repertoire party line was further confirmed in our interview, when I asked the pianist about future programme ideas. 'If I were to play Rossini's "Preludio religioso" from the *Petite Messe solennelle*, Franck's *Prélude, Choral et Fugue*, plus Liszt's *Nuages gris* and Sonata in B minor in one recital, I think it would be great.' So would countless piano fans! An all-Chopin programme is scheduled for Lim's February 2024 Carnegie Hall recital debut in New York. Further recordings will be widely anticipated.

Like many young super-virtuosos, Lim adores the transcription repertoire, and hopes to make original contributions to that genre, as well as pursuing his creativity further. 'When I was attending the Korea National Institute for the Gifted in Arts, my teacher for vocal training and ear training, Jeon Minjae, recommended that composition and transcription should be done by people who play the piano well. Since then, I have attempted to arrange solo and two-piano versions of pieces such as Schubert's *Winterreise* and Mahler's Symphony No 8, but I did not like any of them and discarded them. I also love jazz. Bill Evans, of course, is also a great artist, but for me, the music of Art Tatum and Oscar Peterson resonates with me the most deeply. I want to express music freely on stage like these two, but I'm not sure if I can do so myself.'

Such humility is typical of Yunchan Lim. What this astonishing young pianist can already express and communicate through his instrument at this early point in his career, together with this humble self-effacement, promises a long and fulfilling artistic journey that we can all look forward to sharing. **IP**

Yunchan Lim's live recording of Liszt's Transcendental Études is reviewed on page 54

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TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

Pianistic shock and awe

Georges Cziffra's outsize virtuosity could draw attention away from the music

Bryce Morrison continues our series on pianists who have divided critical opinion by assessing the unique artistry of Georges Cziffra, whose explosive virtuosity and impulsive temperament came – for some – at the expense of poetry and refinement

When it comes to pianists generating controversy, Georges Cziffra raises the bar to an almost unprecedented height. Arriving in Paris following his dramatic escape from a horrific and troubled past in his native Hungary, his first recital was of such prodigious virtuosity that he was acclaimed to be greater than Horowitz. Over time, astonishment and adulation became modified as the suspicion crept in that here was a pianist whose virtuosity was not inclusive or musicianly, and that his primary aim was to bludgeon his audience into a state of stupefaction. Some may have recalled the words of two of France's greatest composers. For Debussy, 'the attraction of the virtuoso for the public is very much like that of the circus for the crowd. There is always a hope that something dangerous will happen,' while Fauré disdained the 'horror of virtuosity … and of those effects that send shivers down the spine of the audience'.

From the start Cziffra provoked extreme reactions. Those of a judicious or nervous disposition ran for cover, left anxiously waiting for the all-clear after playing that was neatly described as combining the

precision of a metronome with the electrical discharge of a thunderstorm. Yet some gloried in what others feared, celebrating Cziffra's trademark rapid mid-phrase crescendos and manic accelerations – as if a grenade had been thrown into the piano – as well as an engulfing bravura that could sweep aside even the most rudimentary notion of reserve or discretion. If any pianist had what David Fanning has aptly called 'the boggle factor', it was Cziffra.

Vladimir Ashkenazy declared that we were once music's masters but now we are its servants. Yet the reverse is surely true of Cziffra; indeed, Cziffra and servility are polar opposites. Consider the famous recording of the complete Chopin Études, first issued in 1963, which has always been central to Cziffra's reputation and capacity for controversy, celebrated and scorned in equal measure. When you hear the admired recordings of these Études by, say, Cortot, the young Ashkenazy or Pollini, you are aware of differing ways of crossing the Rubicon from pragmatism to poetry. Hearing Cziffra it is quickly apparent that he takes you on a reverse journey, one where arguably the re-creator supersedes the creator. Leaving aside the superhuman virtuosity, when we listen to the slow études – Op 10 Nos 3 and 6, Op 25 No 7 – we have to wonder what Chopin would have made of such salon reduction. Elsewhere, when Cziffra unleashes his full arsenal of effects, you never know what is going to happen next and when he is going to lob another explosive device on to proceedings. Everything pulses with an air of expectation. In Op 10 No 7 (for me, Chopin's Toccata), every note is the equal of Ignaz Friedman's legendary recording, yet enviable fluency is combined with Cziffra's unique volatility and incandescence. In his hands the C major Op 10 No 1 becomes a 'runaway chorale' rather than a more dignified or epic utterance. And in the notoriously demanding Étude in thirds, Op 25 No 6, Cziffra leaves you wondering whether you have ever heard an even remotely similar reading, one that takes its sinister whirl to the very edge. Some will view all of this as evidence of a vulgar, free-for-all approach, and the question arises: did Cziffra, a man of modest, even shy disposition, truly see these Études in such a lurid and demonic light, or does his playing exemplify other criteria and different priorities?

I have focused on this recording because, more than any other, it simultaneously reveals unique gifts and dazzling perversity. But Cziffra recorded extensively, and he can be heard to less obviously controversial advantage in repertoire less subtle or musically demanding than Chopin's Études. Liszt's First *Mephisto Waltz* is as dramatically charged as even the most ardent devil worshipper could wish, and Cziffra is entirely at home in the *Hungarian Rhapsodies*. And if for Alfred Brendel, with his insistence on Liszt's essential nobility, such performances provide confirmation of this music's 'hasty workmanship, the shallowness, the expensive glare which mar the Rhapsodies' (in the words of Edward Sackville-West and Desmond Shawe-Taylor's *The Record Guide*), Cziffra's teasing, ardent, skyrocketing aplomb surely

TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

If any pianist had the 'boggle factor', it was Cziffra

possesses its own validity. Moreover, there is a surprising degree of poetry and restraint in his recordings of Liszt's 'Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este' (from the third book of *Années de pèlerinage*), while his 'Feux follets' (from the *Transcendental Études*) is concerned more with evocation than display.

Yet if I were to single out one recording that shows Cziffra at his most mesmeric it would be his account of Liszt's 'Gnomenreigen,' the second of the two *Études de concert*. He recorded this piece several times, both live

When Cziffra unleashes his arsenal of effects, you never know what is going to happen next

and in the studio, and at its finest his playing has such character and verve that you can only wonder in disbelief how it is possible to play like this – indeed, to feel, to think like this.

Sadly, indeed tragically, Cziffra's final years were deeply unhappy. The death of his son in an apartment fire in 1981 made him retreat into hermit-like seclusion. His playing, too, began to sound like a parody of its former self. Recordings of Brahms's 'Paganini' Variations and Schumann's *Études symphoniques* show a musical if not technical decline. Critical exultance had dimmed, and as musical taste altered, as it does, leaning towards a loftier, purer form of address, Cziffra's outsize pianism was increasingly dismissed out of hand.

Was an element of jealousy, of Shakespeare's green-eyed monster, aroused in lesser pianists? Out of fashion, out of touch with today's more 'correct' notions of musicianship, Cziffra remains a unique phenomenon, a pianist whose recordings will continue to leave new generations of listeners alternately shocked, awed and bemused. **IP**

ALAHATTIN KANLIOGLU

Zoe Samsarelou finds inspiration in the cult of Dionysus and its symbolism

True essence

Greek pianist **Zoe Samsarelou** combines her fascination for music and mythology in her debut album dedicated to the god Dionysus

I studied archaeology alongside music so am very interested in ancient Greek mythology and its influence on musical compositions. Dionysus, besides wine, is strongly associated with theatre and democracy. In a broader sense he also connects with our underlying primitive nature, namely our light and dark inner self. Alternations between emotions, colours and moods, a key feature of the behaviour of the satyrs and Dionysus, is also a favourite theme for composers.

Dionysus (aka Bacchus) was the youngest of the Olympian gods and enjoyed an ardent following throughout the ancient Greek world. His cult was so popular that four annual Dionysus festivals were celebrated in ancient Athens. Drama is believed to have originated in the late 6th century bce from the urban part of the festival of Great Dionysia. Around this time, two momentous innovations occurred: the invention of theatre and the establishment of democracy, both of which determined the political, social and cultural evolution of humanity.

In Euripides' final tragedy *The Bacchae*, written in 407BCE, Dionysus is everywhere in Nature. Humans, however, are the only beings that live apart from Nature, because they have entrenched themselves in their own rationale. Living as they do, cut off from the god, they receive harsh punishment every time they renounce him.

On the slopes of Mount Cithaeron, the Bacchae and maenads (the god's ardent female followers) dance frenziedly to the accompaniment of wild music. This is the dance of the Earth, whose rhythm the women have absorbed. In a state of trance, they see the god and unite with him. For Euripides, this is true wisdom.

I too believe this is the meaning of Dionysus today. We need to reawaken our feelings and find a balance between our emotional and rational nature. If we resist Dionysus, we will face unpredictable and destructive consequences, whether this be in our mental and physical health, or the environment.

My programme for this album is the result of many years' study and research. Ever since I was an undergraduate in Berlin and Hamburg, I have sought out any piece related to Greek mythology that caught my ear. My aim was to collect as much music as possible on the theme of Dionysus.

To enrich my understanding, I studied – and continue to study – many publications about the cult of Dionysus and its symbolism. This is an enormous and complex subject. It has not only been a focus of study for scholars (including philologists, archaeologists and psychoanalysts) but also a source of limitless inspiration for artists.

My album comprises 41 tracks ranging in length from 90 seconds to 10 minutes, so it was challenging to create an integrated programme while rendering the attributes of Dionysus expressed in the title of each piece. This was a process I found completely absorbing: it is my life's work.

I have arranged the works under conceptual titles to create an interconnected narrative. We start with *Seduction*, which refers to the indiscreet advances of the faun towards the naiads; then *Pathos*, which has to do with sadness and pity on account of the faun's grief; *Illusion* – the faun's unfulfilled dreams; *Metamorphosis* – the nymphs' attempt to escape the satyr's lust, but also the transformation of the housebound women into Bacchae during their initiation; *Transcendence* is about the ecstatic state of the Bacchae, the futility of life and death, and the transgression of limits; *Instinct* explores the natural powers unleashed through the drinking of wine; *Catharsis* is the state of the soul at the time of death, reproduced in the experience of the initiation in the mysteries; *Mythos* has to do with aspects of the various mythological beings; *Paradox* – the contrasting emotions, colours and moods of the satyrs and nymphs; and finally *Transition* from primal to civilisation.

Many tracks feature French Baroque composers, who wrote music for the high society of the French court. Both Couperin and Rameau were closely associated with this milieu. In France, during the reign of Louis XIV (17th-18th century), all the arts were influenced by ancient Greece. Parisian salons were filled with paintings, sculptures, furniture and objects that included references to ancient Greece. Greek mythology in general and Dionysian myths in particular were a source of inspiration and a point of reference for artists.

The French Revolution at the end of the 18th century influenced the Greek Revolution in 1821, which sparked the pan-European movement of philhellenism. French admirers of classical Greece saw it as the revival of the

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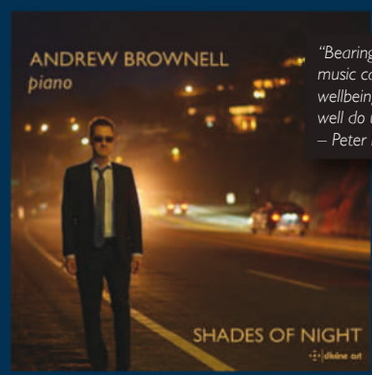

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KATERINA KARAGIANNAKIDOU

Zoe Samsarelou is artistic director of the International PelionFestival in her native Greece

ancient spirit, and French artists endorsed this in their work. Likewise, French composers of the period wrote works inspired by ancient Greece.

I have included pieces by Debussy, Déodat de Séverac, Paul Dukas and Florent Schmitt, plus an excerpt from the opera *Bacchus* by Massenet in which many references are made to wine. I wonder whether the close connection French people have with wine explains why French artists find Dionysus so inspiring?

I have also included music by six Greek composers. Every modern Greek artist, having grown up with the mythology, history and civilisation of the ancient Greeks, can readily tap into this source, which provides strong material for one's mind and imagination. It is ambrosia for creativity.

Nikos Skalkottas (1904-49) wrote tonal, modal, atonal and 12-note compositions. In all his works there are elements of Greek folk music, which he incorporated in a completely personal way. The compositions of Dimitri Terzakis (born 1938) and Giorgos Koumendakis (born 1959) are rooted both in Greek traditions and the wider musical cultures of the eastern Mediterranean. Each of the others – Lina Tonia, Nestor Taylor (an Australian of Greek descent), Dimitris Maragopoulos and Aspasia Nasopoulou – has a unique and powerfully expressive aesthetic.

I believe the authenticity and sincerity of the artist springs from deep within their nature, resonating in harmony with Nature – with a capital N – that envelops us all. The truth of this is more overt in the music of some composers, while in others it is covert. Here again is Dionysus!

Although my album is exclusively dedicated to Dionysus and various perspectives of the Dionysian myth, Apollonian qualities also make an appearance – for example, the Muses who accompanied Apollo, or the nymphs associated with both gods.

Ever since the publication of Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* in 1872, people have ceased referring to the gods Apollo and Dionysus. Instead, we tend to speak of their archetypes: Apollonian and Dionysian.

Nietzsche suggests that in a broad sense these elements reflect the opposition between reason and instinct, civilisation and the primitive. Both elements function in parallel but also compete with each other. As Nietzsche discerned, it is precisely the amalgamation of Apollonian-Dionysian elements which, in a brief but enlightening moment of human inspiration, resulted in the birth of ancient drama. Not only is this coalescence necessary for every artistic creation, but to the human condition itself.

The sculptures of Apollo and Dionysus in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi attest to the extensiveness of the Greek spirit. The east pediment depicts Apollo and the Muses, while on the west is Dionysus playing the kithara among the maenads. It is as though Apollo gave over half his temple and his favourite musical instrument to Dionysus. The myth says that during the winter months, Apollo went away from Delphi, leaving Dionysus in his place. In this unique balance at Delphi, the harmony of the Apollonian spirit coexists with the unbound energy of Dionysus.

The gods were creations of the imagination of the ancient Greeks, reflecting their own magnified personal needs, which is why they represented them in human yet idealised form. The only god of the Pantheon who was mortal and died, but who, through transcendence, was also resurrected, is Dionysus.

In today's society I think people exceed their limits on a daily basis, becoming alienated from Nature. We are dependent on technology and increasingly influenced by artificial intelligence: the screen has replaced physical presence.

Progress cannot be stopped and is undoubtedly worthwhile when humanity is respected. But how can we express emotion through an electronic device? Where do our real needs lie? This, I believe, is the message of Dionysus today: our liberation from the bonds of rationalism to express freely our true essence.

I have put my heart and soul into this album, so hope it will help listeners experience the liberating energy of the myth of Dionysus as expressed through music. **IP**

INTERVIEW BY OWEN MORTIMER

Zoe Samsarelou's 'Ex-stasis: Dionysus, Nymphs and Satyrs' is available from Divine Art (DDX21237) and is reviewed on page 55

Zoe Samsarelou is artistic director of the International PelionFestival, whose 23rd edition takes place on 21-29 July 2023. ***pelionfestival.com/zoe-samsarelou***

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Villa-Lobos's Rudepoêma

TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

Heitor Villa-Lobos composed Rudepoêma, his largest solo piano work, in the 1920s

Richard Whitehouse listens to the available recordings of an electrifyingly virtuosic piano work composed for Arthur Rubinstein and recommends some essential listening

The period between the two world wars saw a rich harvest of piano music written by or for virtuosos. Works by Bartók and Prokofiev have long since entered the modern repertoire, but others remain near its periphery. Chief among these is *Rudepoêma* – the largest single piece for this medium by Heitor Villa-Lobos and one that finds both his musical idiom at its most provocative and his technical requirements at their most challenging. With its centenary fast approaching, now seems a good time to consider just what this (in)famous work represents.

The genesis of Rudepoêma

It is easily overlooked that two of the most virtuosic piano scores from this time were written for Arthur Rubinstein, remembered by those who heard him in his later years as a master of capricious understatement but who, in his earlier maturity, inspired and premiered both *Trois mouvements de Pétrouchka* and the present work. Stravinsky readily confessed the technical difficulties of his piece put it beyond his own pianistic skills and this is likely true for Villa-Lobos, not least as *Rudepoêma* was expressly intended as a musical portrait of its dedicatee.

Its Portuguese title translates (not too inaccurately) as 'Savage Poem', and Villa-Lobos went on to explain in a highly explicit dedication that 'I do not know if I have fully assimilated your soul … but I swear with all my heart that I have the impression in my mind of having recorded your temperament then of mechanically transcribing it onto paper – like a candid camera. Hence, if I have succeeded, you will be the true author of this work'. The 1920s saw a variety of major projects – notably the series of *Chôros*, of which the Eleventh (also dedicated to Rubinstein) features a concertante piano part hardly less outsize in conception and which doubtless reflects his already having witnessed the Polish-American pianist give the first performance of *Rudepoêma* at the Salle Gaveau in Paris on 24 October 1927. Its relative infrequency of performance thereafter led the composer to transcribe the piece for orchestra – in which guise it was premiered in Rio de Janeiro on 15 July 1942 but which, despite undoubted verve and immediacy, makes for an altogether less visceral experience: sample it in a performance by the Slovak Radio Symphony Orchestra under Roberto Duarte (Marco Polo 8 223552).

For all its textural density and rhythmic fluidity, the structure of *Rudepoêma* is by no means prolix, the whole edifice being founded upon two themes heard at the outset in the left and right hands respectively. As the composer and author Robert Matthew-Walker once pointed out: 'The overall structure of the piece … is quite straightforward and combines elements of continuous melodic variation with vestigial traces of sonata [form],

the whole harmonically adhering to its own rules which are necessarily the opposite of those of traditional functional harmony'. Essentially a development, the tempestuous central phase is followed by a much altered and elaborated reprise which itself subsides into the longest stretch of sustained and inward expression; one, moreover, that makes the eruptive coda feel the more unnerving.

Arthur Rubinstein

Although retaining much of Villa-Lobos's music in his repertoire, to the extent of including 'O polichinelo' (from the first volume of *A prole do bebê*) in his farewell recital at London's Wigmore Hall in May 1976, Rubinstein never made a commercial recording of *Rudepoêma*. Luckily, the broadcast of a 1940 performance at New York's Museum of Modern Art is on YouTube (see discography). Despite limited sound and a fade-out three-quarters of the way through, thanks to the dictates of radio scheduling, this affords real insight into his innate understanding of the work; how he viewed its evolution and gauged its febrile momentum, with his musicianship still at its height. Whether or not a complete transfer comes to light, it would be worth issuing this account, for its benchmark status and historical significance.

The 1970s and '80s

Half a century on, **Nelson Freire**'s *Rudepoêma* still takes some beating. His later years might have focused increasingly on the standard repertoire but the sheer energy and attack evident here holds attention from the outset. Nor is this visceral expression lacking in formal balance, as witnessed by a clarity of motivic evolution over the explosive central stages or that poised anticipation before the coda is unleashed. The sound feels a little shallow and unyielding but the sheer presence of Freire's reading comes through with its power and panache unimpeded.

Roberto Szidon assembled a Villa-Lobos collection as his debut recording for EMI Brazil in 1965 but the DG anthology 10 years later finds him at his technical and interpretative peak. Not least a *Rudepoêma* of formidable dexterity and, during the equivocal later stages, telling emotional candour. In the demonstrative central phase his virtuosity, abetted by vivid though clinical sound typical of DG from this time, feels overbearing but its precision can hardly be denied. Still the first reading by which to familiarise oneself with this uncompromising piece.

A pianist of wide-ranging inclination, **Volker Banfield** has covered a diverse repertoire and his *Rudepoêma* is notable for attention to detail and clarity of conception. Comparison with those above underlines the relatively two-dimensional nature of his approach, with the faster episodes – of what, at barely 17 minutes, is the swiftest of any recording – brutal rather than savage and the quieter ones lacking in pathos. Maybe in seeking to align this piece with the European avant-garde, Banfield rather neglects its inherent spontaneity and flights of fancy.

TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

Arthur Rubinstein: the young virtuoso was the inspiration and dedicatee of Rudepoêma

Something of a legend in his native Brazil, **Arthur Moreira Lima** brings a keen rhetoric and undoubted majesty to his reading of *Rudepoêma*. Just occasionally a tendency to underline salient detail and rhythmic patterns can get the better of him, but despite this and the rather metallic sound quality, the sense of discovering this music 'in real time' is always apparent. Moreover, its status of having moved away from 19th-century virtuoso convention as much as it remains distinct from post-war complexity is reaffirmed in the pulverising final bars.

Alone among these pianists in having recorded the piece twice, **Sonia Rubinsky** first tackled *Rudepoêma* along with Debussy and Messiaen; a persuasive and relevant context for what is otherwise a rather underpowered and uninvolving account, whatever its technical adroitness and tonal finesse. It hardly helps when the sound tends to coarsen in dynamics much above *forte* and becomes congested in more intricate passages (a fair proportion of the whole). Nor does her almost somnolent tempo for the final stages afford unity to the overall conception.

The 1990s

Opening the first in her four-volume survey of Villa-Lobos's piano music, *Rudepoêma* finds **Débora Halász** making a conscious statement of intent. There are few readings more adept in mapping out the work's formal contours or bringing its expressive extremes into persuasive accord. Although exuding no lack of clarity, the sound lacks the last degree of tonal lustre so the final pages are less overwhelming than they might otherwise have been, yet the combined power and poise of this

SIM CANNETY-CLARKE

Rudepoêma is well suited to Marc-André Hamelin's virtuoso pianism

version make it well worth hearing if not, ultimately, a front runner.

Part of a representative overall recital of this composer, the *Rudepoêma* of **Roberta Rust** is eminently appealing and one that points up antecedents in the piano music from an earlier generation (notably Albéniz and Debussy) more readily than most. The sound, not lacking for perspective, is a little too resonant for this pianist's dynamic sensitivity fully to register. Not that this aspect, nor the pianist's too often sectional approach, seriously undermines the attractions of an account deserving wider dissemination than seems to have been the case.

At almost 26 minutes, the *Rudepoêma* by **Luiz de Moura Castro** is the longest yet recorded and a certain flaccidity of motion undeniably sets in across its course. Partial compensation comes through the wealth of nuance teased from its complex textures, making this a version worth studying alongside the score. Nor is there a lack of impetus over its central span and in the coda, even if what precedes the latter hangs fire to the point of torpidity. One comes away from this reading with renewed appreciation of the musical content but not its essence.

Much more focused as an interpreter, **Alfred Heller** gives a tensile and often incisive account of *Rudepoêma* with no lack of drive in demonstrative passages. The sound yields a slightly dullish sheen to the piano tone but neither this nor the lack of truly quiet or inward playing is to the detriment of the recording overall. That it comes at the conclusion of a Villa-Lobos recital otherwise centred on his miniatures further enhances its impact, not least as the pianist fairly charges through the coda at the end of this sometimes unsubtle yet never uneventful reading.

One would expect a work such as *Rudepoêma* to be eminently suited to a pianist of **Marc-André Hamelin**'s awesome powers as it proves at the close of his programme otherwise devoted to Villa-Lobos miniatures. Its technical command is everywhere apparent; so too that tendency to control or calculate every aspect that has come to dominate his musical thinking. Recorded with enviable clarity, the absence of spontaneity and imagination means the whole is no more than the sum of its parts – not least in a coda astounding in its accuracy while unyielding in its expression.

The new century

For her second reading, **Sonia Rubinsky** places *Rudepoêma* at the close of the sixth volume in what is the most inclusive survey yet of Villa-Lobos's piano output. Nearly two minutes slower, this is a more considered and probing account which, with its spacious if slightly unfocused sound, imparts scale and even monumentality to the work's latter stages. A certain diffuseness was likely inevitable, though never such an issue as to deny this a place towards the top of the shortlist. Certainly, the final pages round off the work (and this series) to commanding effect.

A pity that the capable and frequently arresting pianism of **Joanna Brzezińska** is not heard to better effect in her take on *Rudepoêma*, which forms the culmination of another Villa-Lobos anthology. If rather soft-grained sound is partly to blame, it at least underlines the poise and delicacy of playing that at times assumes an almost impressionist manner. Elsewhere, this over-constrained quality fatally undersells the music's visceral impact and hence conspires to leave this account out of the reckoning when it comes to any more general consideration.

A refreshingly different approach from **Andreas Woyke**, his *Rudepoêma* among the faster of available versions but with little sense of haste as he pursues his agile and impetuous course across its often treacherous topography. The dexterity and accuracy of his playing are second to none, yet a concomitant emotional aspect manifests itself in the cumulative intensity of the latter stages, where a subtle and affecting poignancy is no less evident. As the coda hurtles by with electrifying intent, there can be little doubt of this being a version to rank with the finest.

Although his *Rudepoêma* does not quite evince this level of magnetism, **Yuval Zorn** – whose reading comes as part of an exceptionally well-planned miscellany – is still a dependable and often perceptive advocate. Of especial interest is his touch of irony audible during the central stages, which emerge as more self-contained than usual, though the rather neutral sound may partly account for this and the detached quality of what follows. Not a front runner but a reading worth returning to – not least given the context in which this piece has been placed.

The most recent recordings

Alas, the *Rudepoêma* of **Martha Marchena** cannot be given even a cautious recommendation, for which blurred and out-of-focus sound is largely to blame. Listening through this relative murk reveals a forceful and often combative reading with no lack of textural detail or overall impact, albeit a tendency for the piano tone to distort during more heavily chorded passages. Ultimately, such audible virtuosity (both here and in the rest of this Villa-Lobos programme) is undone by a recording that makes her version relevant only in a strictly comparative sense.

The most recent recording of *Rudepoêma* is far more recommendable. Skilled remixer as well as pianist, **Nathan Ben-Yehuda** places his account in an enterprising context featuring Haydn and his own 'Astral mixtapes'. Not that there is anything gimmicky about his conception or its realisation, which unfolds as a convincing overall unity even if more demonstrative passages seem overly reined in. There is an evocative atmosphere in the later stages, however, together with an underlying sense of purpose made manifest with the dextrous virtuosity of the coda.

Conclusions

Although it has come into its own recording-wise over recent decades, *Rudepoêma* has yet to secure its claims on the standard repertoire in terms either of performers or listeners. That the piece remains difficult to place in the live medium seems less an issue in that of recording, as is witnessed by those numerous collections 'themed' according to nationality and conception discussed here. Doubtless future releases will find ever more ingenious or imaginative means of programming music always likely to dominate whatever context in which it is presented.

In terms of *Rudepoêma* recordings available, Roberto Szidon remains a benchmark by virtue of his clarity and precision – qualities shared with Marc-André Hamelin, who nonetheless tends to micro-manage every facet. Arthur Moreira Lima is eminently worth returning to for his sheer spontaneity, along with the relative circumspection of Roberta Rust or (not unduly) slow-burning rhetoric of Sonia Rubinsky's remake. Among the most recent options, Andreas Woyke sets out distinctive possibilities such as future interpreters could profitably draw upon.

Yet if it comes down to choosing just one recording, it would be that by Nelson Freire. True, the sound rather betrays its 50-year provenance, but his palpable identity with, belief in and love for this music comes over in every bar. Had he re-recorded it in his later years (though the piece would have been ill-suited to his 2012 collection of Brazilian miniatures for Decca) Freire might well have uncovered even greater expressive subtlety and emotional depth, but the sense of 'Savage Poem' rendered as a potent and affecting whole has yet to be equalled. **IP**

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Nelson Freire set the bar high with the first commercial recording of Rudepoêma

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

1973	**Nelson Freire**	Warner Classics 2564 60902-4
1975	**Roberto Szidon**	DG 477 5439GTA2
1984	**Volker Banfield**	Wergo WER60110-50
1988	**Arthur Moreira Lima**	Editora Caras PB11-11136
1989	**Sonia Rubinsky**	Arabesque Z6973
1994	**Débora Halász**	BIS BIS-CD712
1994	**Roberta Rust**	Centaur CRC2224
1995	**Luiz de Moura Castro**	Euterpe 96305
1997	**Alfred Heller**	Etcetera KTC1220
1999	**Marc-André Hamelin**	Hyperion CDA67176
2006	**Sonia Rubinsky**	Naxos 8 557735
2008	**Joanna Brzezińska**	Claves 50-2913
2018	**Andreas Woyke**	ARS Produktion ARS38 260 (SACD)
2019	**Yuval Zorn**	Rubicon RCD1052
2021	**Martha Marchena**	MSR Classics MS1764
2022	**Nathan Ben-Yehuda**	Yarlung YAR54481

Arthur Rubinstein's 1940 broadcast can be heard at **youtube.com/watch?v=LW53963bf08**

International Piano
MASTERCLASS

Danny Driver talks us through Fauré's Barcarolle No 4 and suggests helpful ways of approaching this elusive music

INTERVIEW BY JESSICA DUCHEN

Fauré's piano music is wonderful but extraordinarily difficult to bring off. The Barcarolle No 4 is one of the shorter and supposedly simpler pieces, but it includes almost every challenge found in his more complicated, substantial structures.

Its structure looks like a classic ternary form with a coda. But when you start to dig into it, the problems begin to emerge. First there's the constant, gentle, swaying motion of a boat, which you need to create from the start. Try to feel each left-hand arpeggio in one beat, but without accelerating: embody that motion by creating a loop with the fluidity of your arm, wrist and hand.

We want the most accurately timed finger touch possible: pearly, light and focused. Fauré is full of these knife-edges: light but not insubstantial; delicate but not weak; emotionally powerful but not overbearing. Perhaps that's why it can be so difficult.

The next challenge is that the melody alternates between two beats in a bar and three [bars 3-4]. The semiquavers beneath should line up so that there's no distortion of the threes. Try practising by playing the left hand's semiquavers under the threes to make sure not to rush through.

These harmonies [bar 4-6] are full of lovely, secret angst, but resist the temptation to dig too deep; go to the bottom of the key without making it heavy, and really feel the glue between the notes. These chords consist of two voices; try playing them with separate hands. When you find something you like, then immediately imitate it in just one hand. With this practice method, we can expose everything.

The hairpin markings [in bar 6] suggest a crescendo or a phrase growing, but in Fauré's music it's an opening out, textural broadening and brightening, maybe a stretch. Take just enough time to feel that the right hand is imitating singers reaching for a higher note.

KAUPOKIKKAS

Danny Driver gives some tips on capturing the distinctive, understated character of Fauré's Fourth Barcarolle

By playing this *mezzo-forte* we can give more volume while keeping a physically connected relationship with the piano where nothing is abrupt.

The astonishing harmonies in bars 13-16 are like looking into a kaleidoscope: you move a fraction, everything rearranges and you're confronted with a new pattern, but within the same frame. It's a question of allowing things to happen, rather than imposing them.

Then we're back to the melody's opening idea, in bars 17-21, and we want to preserve its shape, while also shaping the new inner-voice chromatic scale, which shouldn't dominate, but requires independence within the hands. I'm a fan of repeating long notes while other things are going on. Playing them as two against three forces you to hear and feel different patterns within each voice, so try repeating the top melodic note in two while playing the chromatic scales in three. Or if you want to be brave, try three against four. This is to build independence and enhance the release, making sure nothing is tense. That light, barely touching of the semiquavers has nothing heavy or harsh in the hand. It should feel like a beautifully tailor-made glove.

Bar 22 starts to open out, though it's not Rachmaninov! It's the first point where the figuration in the left hand changes, giving us a little bit of wiggle room. The B natural [bar 24] is a good example of where timing can enhance a perception of two voices. Then the grace note [bar 25] is a problem: how do we make it happen without losing the voicing? It's nice to keep it in the harmony – but without over-pedalling.

Experiment with the pedal, letting it hover at the point where it just catches resonance. That's the golden zone, where magic can happen. Rather than switching the resonance on or off, we can filter it, maintaining a halo of resonance while fading out some harmonies.

The sequence in bars 25-30 is deceptive, the bass line moving in semitones rather than in more conventional fifths. Bar 29-30's version suggests a questioning; and it's there for a reason. It takes us very far from A flat major and we have to find a way back to the tonic. That creates another magical harmonic change [in bars 31-33] to handle with care. We want to feel it melt: not bending the music out of shape but allowing the A flat major to shine when the timing feels right. It's all about feeling the movement in the right arm.

'Even in this piece's freest passges, the feeling of pulse anchors you, like breathing'

Finally, in bar 39, we reach a stable A flat major cadence and a magical sense of serenity; maybe the fact that there was no harmonic resolution for two and a half pages is part of this piece's 'hovering' nature. Bar 39-40 is a release, an elaboration of the cadence's coloration.

For the middle section, there's a simple change to the minor – but my teacher used to say the most powerful change in Western music is from major to minor. One semitone in the middle voice and the feeling immediately freezes over. The challenges multiply. First, how to play a beautiful, lyrical melody in the centre of the texture, divided between the hands [bar 41 onwards]? It's difficult not to bump the note when bringing the other hand into the line, often not on a strong beat. Again, imagine the glue between the notes and carefully prepare the next sound: preface it with the pedal and ensure your fingering feels comfortable.

The rocking barcarolle figure is now in the right hand and needs to be even lighter. Don't worry about being too soft, as Fauré has written this beautifully in the higher register, using it to create the illusion of a lyrical crescendo in the long melody notes [eg bars 42-43] and achieving complex effects with simple harmonic changes [bars 47-48].

This melody is three times the same – but a semitone lower every time. Somehow we're not conscious of that. It feels like a journey that gradually descends into a mysterious world, a sense that one is gently falling. You're almost not aware it's happening. But when you look back, you realise that you've been descending all along.

Try to be aware that the dynamics through the hairpins are not about what Fauré wants us to *do*, but what he wants us to *hear* and *feel*. It can be liberating to think that this piece is not about doing but about listening, getting your whole body and mind involved. The mechanism of playing becomes a response in real time to what you're hearing. There's a great deal of reflection that happens internally as you play this piece and that you can share with an audience.

The double notes in the right-hand ripples, in bar 40 onwards, can be tricky. You can't play them as a chord, putting your hand down on both notes; there's no time to prepare and they will bump and stick out. Instead, imagine you are playing two individual notes simultaneously. To get the fingers alive and nimble, try repeating the double notes individually, alternating them.

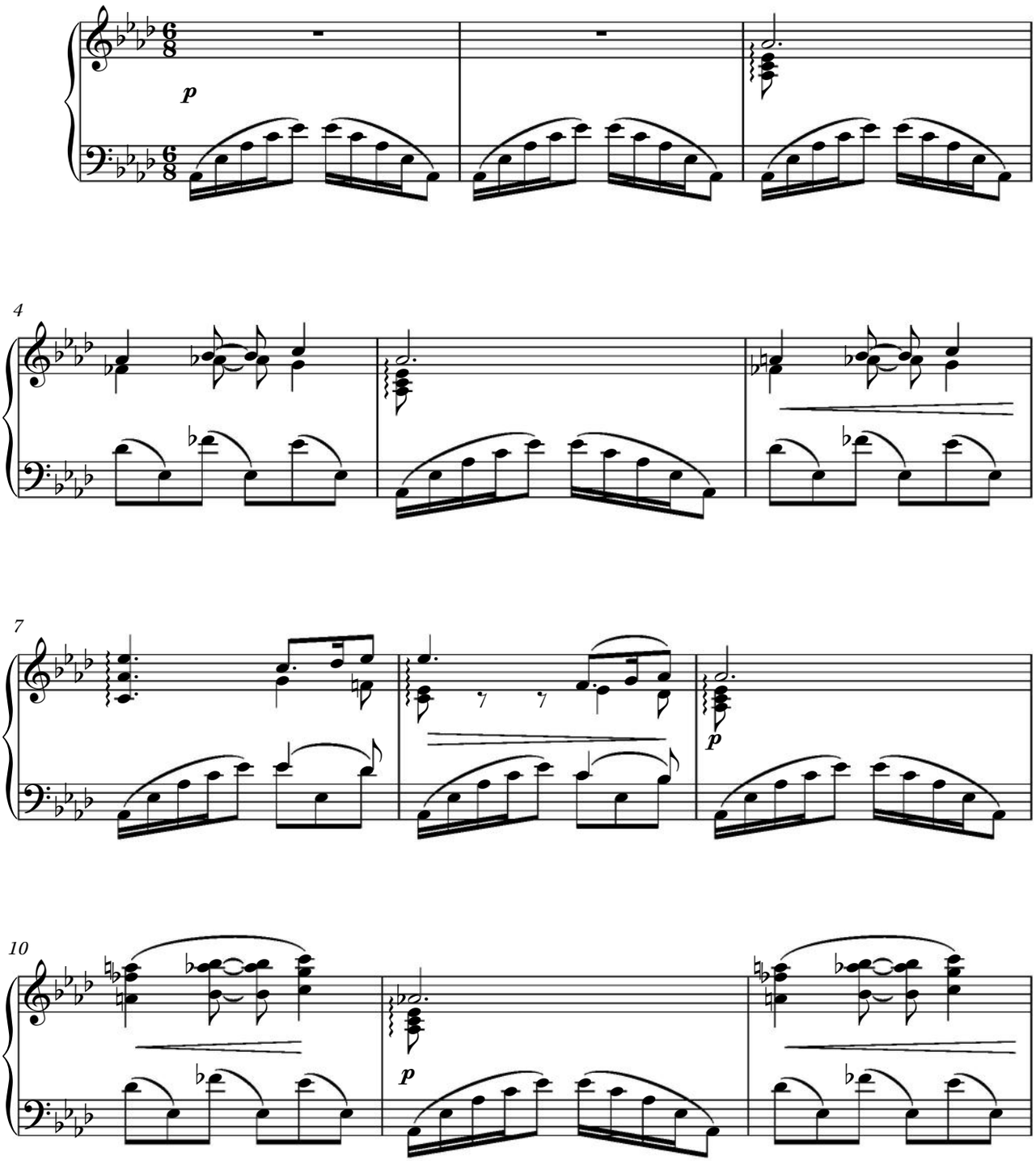
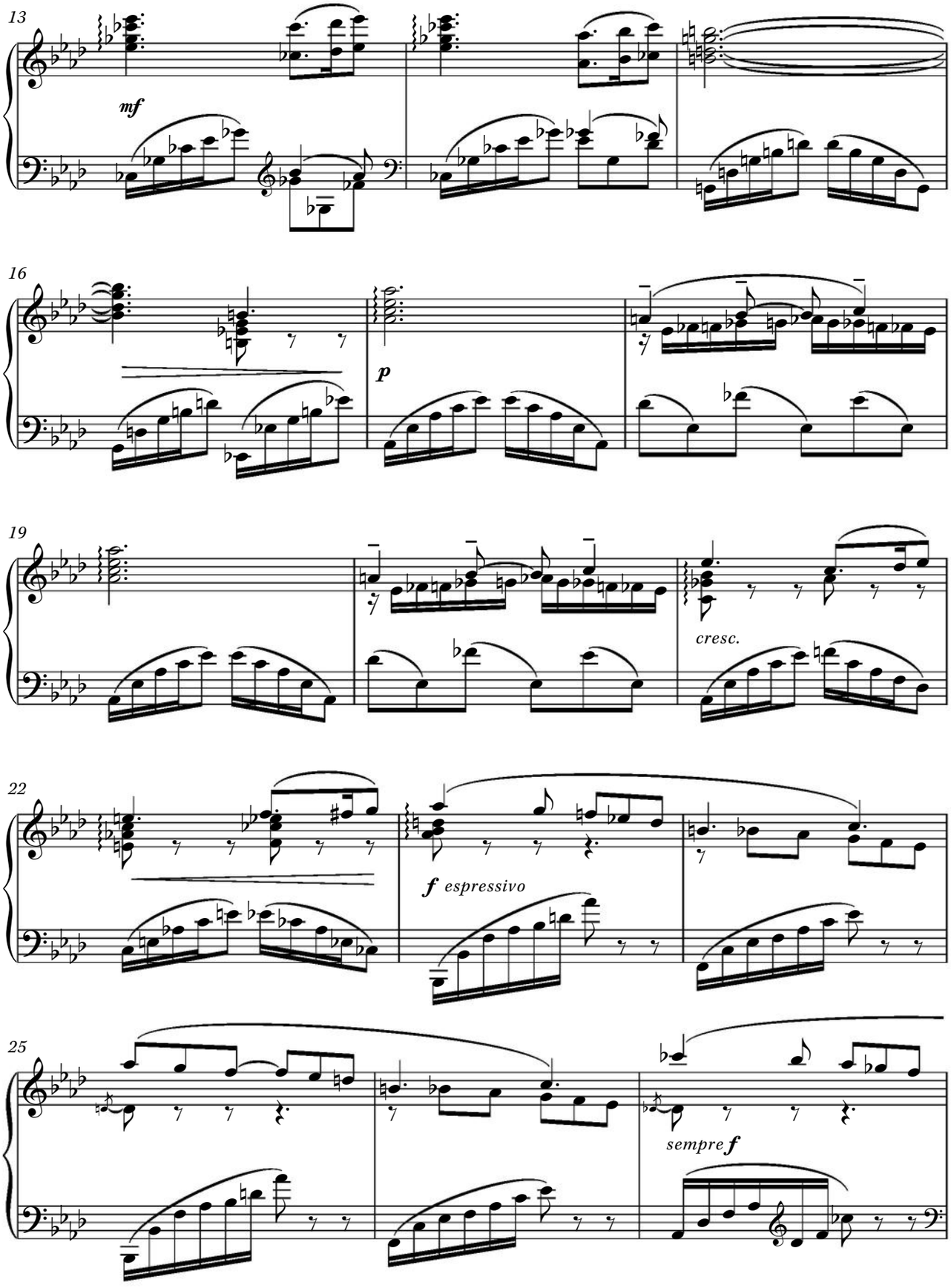
At the G flat minor permutation [bar 57] he's about to change the pattern [bar 60], so we must create the atmosphere for this to happen organically. Look out, too, for the accents in the detached articulation of bars 63-64: what kind of accents are they? I imagine French horns: an instrument where we don't feel an attack. If you want that rich, warm sound, you need the slower muscles to participate, up into the shoulders. Imagine the rallentando as stretching the semiquaver rhythm that's run all the way through.

Now, at bar 66, we're back to the opening theme, but again the difficulties multiply. A downward cascade enriches the texture, but we need to hear the top A flat sustaining. Touch the bass notes very closely and lightly, listen to the resonance in the pedal and take a little bit more time: we can't string together the melody as before because it is constantly infiltrated by these cascades. The left-hand figuration [bar 80 etc] also becomes continuous, creating a sense of a little more freedom.

In bar 87-93 there's a fantasy moment, like a recitative: keep an *understood* feeling of pulse, while also feeling slightly more liberated. The coda is an extended flourish and the rolled chords at the end are free, again with a fluid motion of wrist and arms, plus very active fingertips.

Even in this piece's freest passages, the feeling of pulse anchors you, like breathing. Certain elements need to be well crafted and rigorous, yet they remain in the background, imperceptibly underpinning everything else. We need to be rhythmically quite strict in this music, but the impression must not be strict at all; this seeming contradiction encapsulates a crucial quality in Fauré. There's so much mystery in it. It's very bewitching, beguiling music. Maybe that's why. **IP**

Barcarolle No 4

Gabriel Fauré
Op 44

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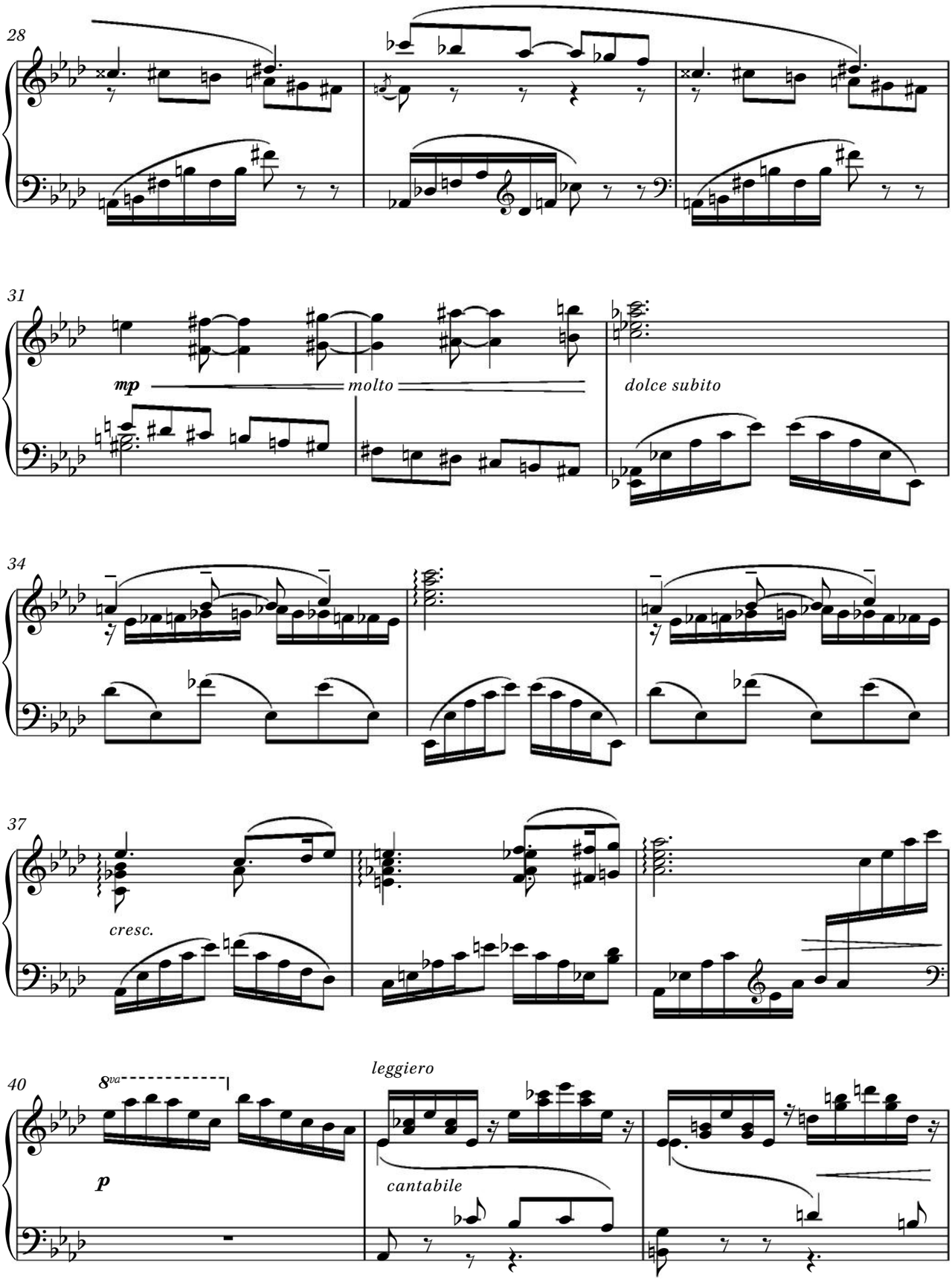
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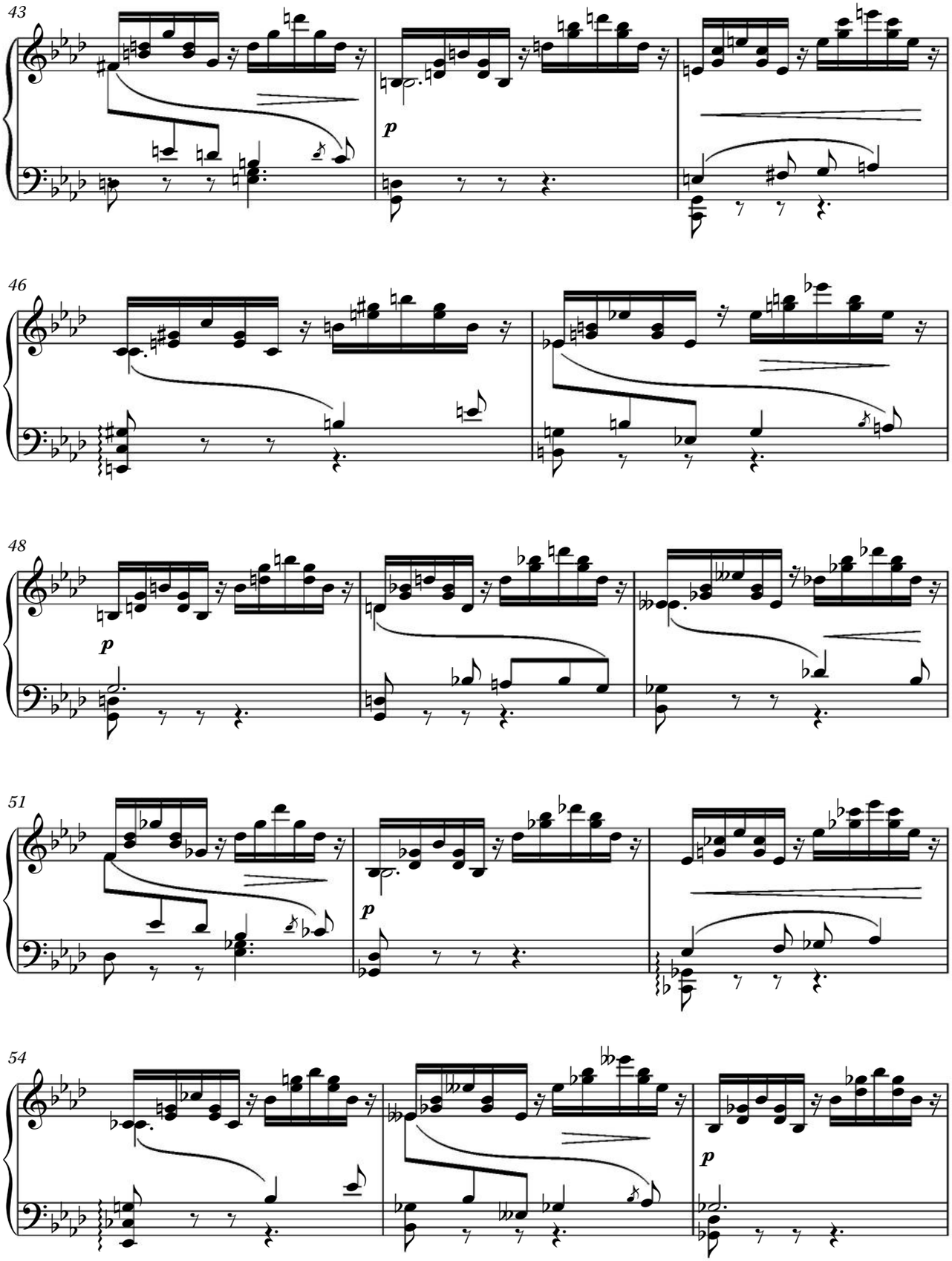
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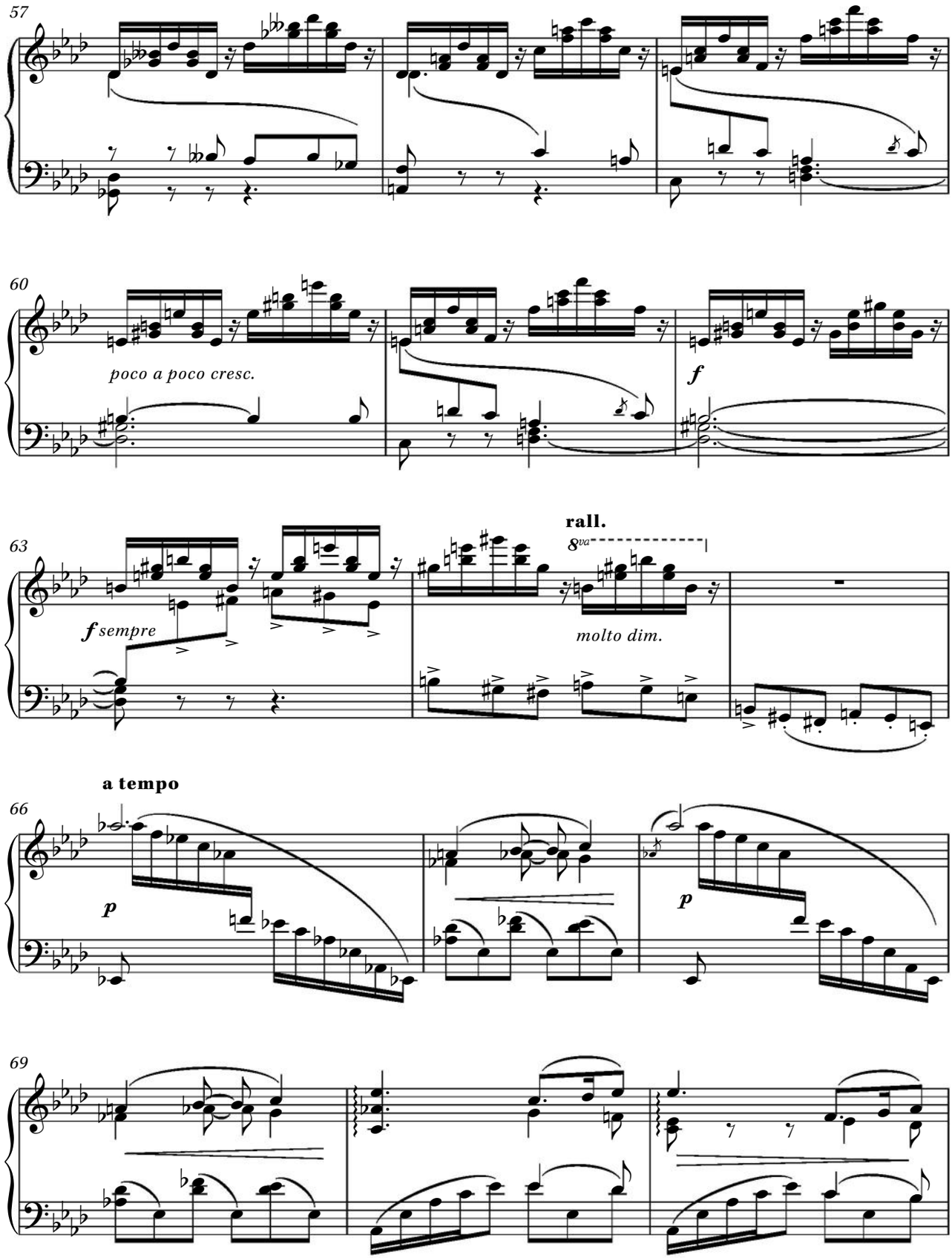
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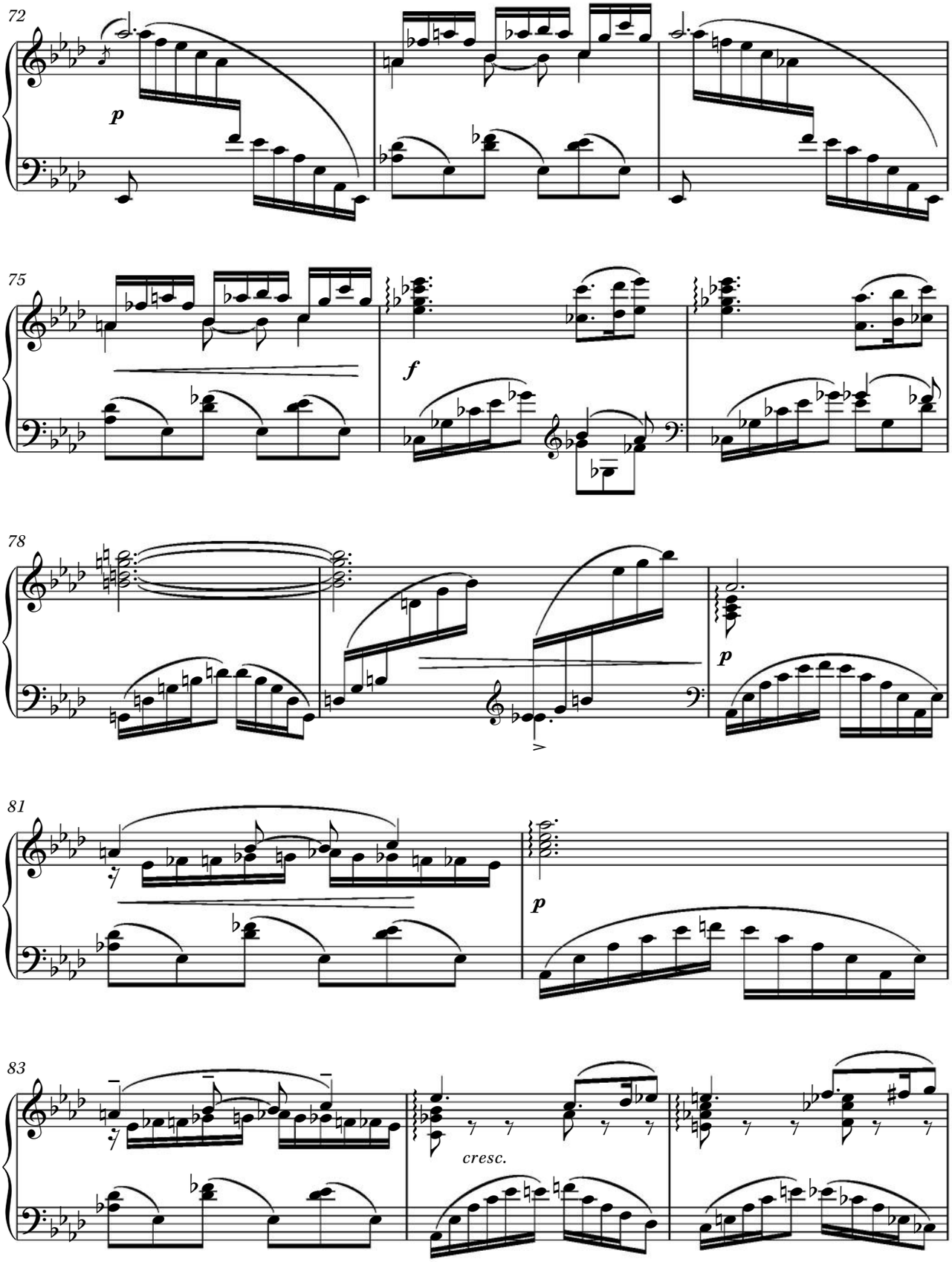
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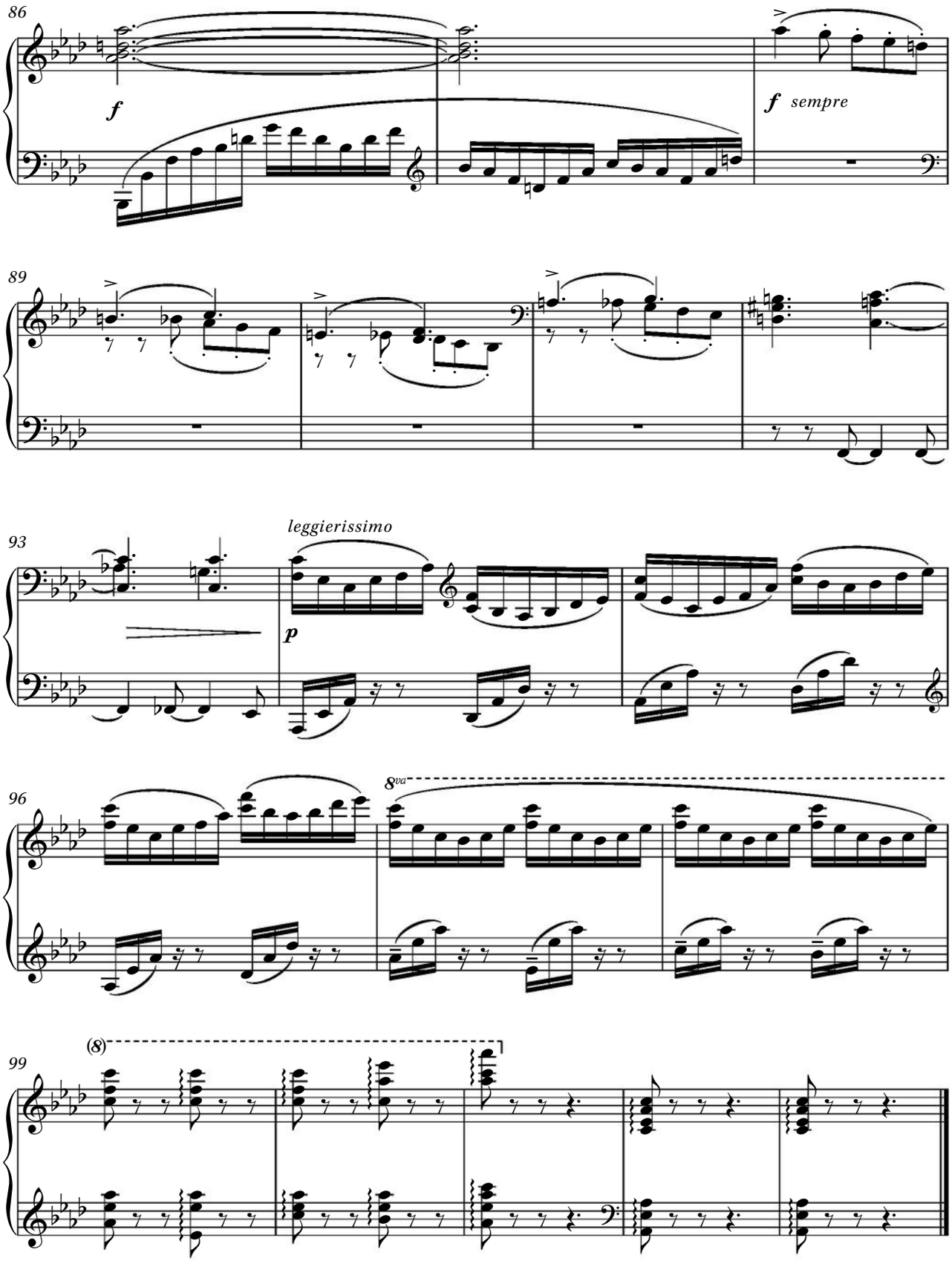
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RETURNING TO THE PIANO

A technical refresher course for recommencing piano enthusiasts, created for *International Piano* by Murray McLachlan

VIII – Strength (Part 1)

Don't be misled by the myths circulated about finger strength. Pianism is not even partially related to bodybuilding and weight training! It does not take superhuman brawn to depress keys on our instrument. We do not need to develop large pectoral muscles. But we do need to cultivate and nurture our 10 digits so that they serve us with reliability, coordination and interdependence. In truth, fingerwork does not exist independently from the other parts of our body. 'Finger strength' means reliability of touch, joints that do not collapse, a sense of empowerment from the bridge (knuckles) of the hand and the ability to play without blockages in the wrist, elbows and shoulders. Clarity, control and articulation will develop when all of these factors synchronise happily. Strength, power and projection will expand and enrich your playing when you can connect effective fingerwork with support when needed from the lower and upper arms, shoulders and torso. At times it can feel as though sound is catapulted forwards powerfully from your feet in the biggest, most massive chords in the repertoire.

'Les cinq doigts'

Having said that, it is fascinating, insightful and useful to place an emphasis in practice on different anatomical parts of the body in turn as you play. Debussy's first Étude 'Pour les cinq doigts' begins with a gently ironic homage to the whole business of finger exercising before meandering off into a fantastic dreamworld. As adult returners looking to empower our physical equipment without injury, it is sensible to take a lead from Debussy and begin with the digits! Let's use just a few bars from Debussy's first study to get us started (see Example 1).

Imagine your body ends with the bridge of the hand. Start with slow five-finger exercises and ensure that there are no collapsed joints – move the fingers from the knuckles as single units. Those with hypermobility issues may find this challenging. 'Double joint' syndrome has its advantages as well as disadvantages, but for reliability and good coordination (that is, 'strength') it is best to consult with a qualified physiotherapist, ideally one who has experience of working with musicians. There are special exercises and approaches that have proved effective for many with this condition. For the rest of us, the issues with five-finger work are mainly concerned with balancing the need for freedom and lightness in the wrists (circular motions always help) while simultaneously ensuring that joints in the eight fingers are firm. Thumbs of course are rather different, requiring flexibility in the joints rather than a firmness that could all too easily lead to cramps and even injuries.

Shaking notes out of your sleeve: the wrist's role

Developing a bouncing flexibility and ease of execution from the wrists can be most

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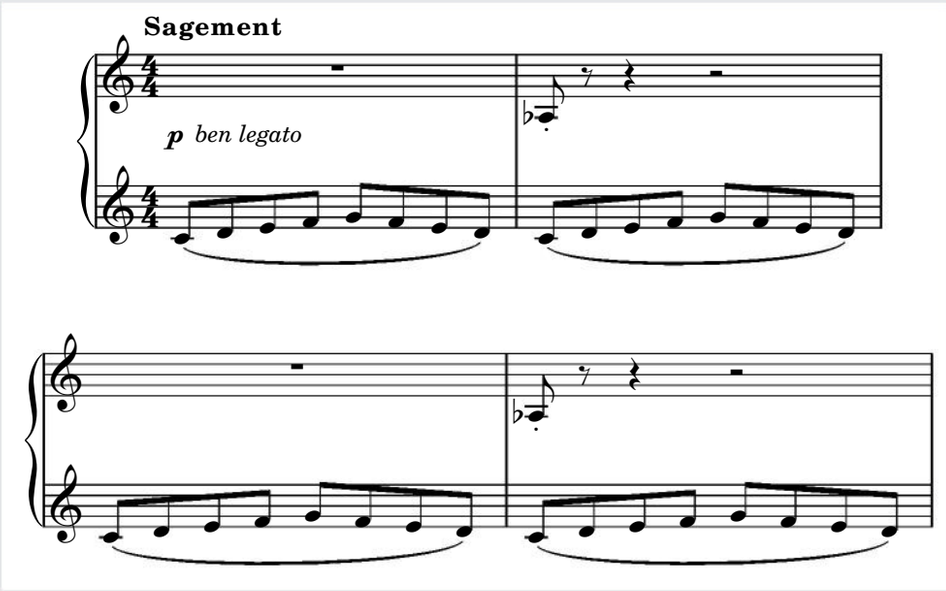


Example 1 ••• *The opening of* ***Debussy****'s Étude No 1, 'Pour les cinq doigts'*

empowering for facility and strength in performance. As you work towards the effortless brilliance needed in so many bravura passages and the controlled, concentrated freedom necessary to successfully realise the first inversion triads at the start of the finale of Beethoven's C major Piano Sonata Op 2 No 3 (see Example 2), we could do worse than start by placing our fingers on a group of notes and bouncing upwards, almost playing by default as we spring upwards and out of the keyboard. Imagine that you are a trampolinist. Each triad, note or octave you play in this manner must be prepared in advance: get your fingers over the notes, then spring off them on to the next note(s). Try this out in slow motion with the opening of this Beethoven finale.

As you build up facility with 'playing from the wrist' you should feel as though your rapid motions shiver or vibrate within a concentrated, controlled radius. Such an approach is a very reliable and effective means of realising many octave passages, particularly in the extensive output of Liszt.

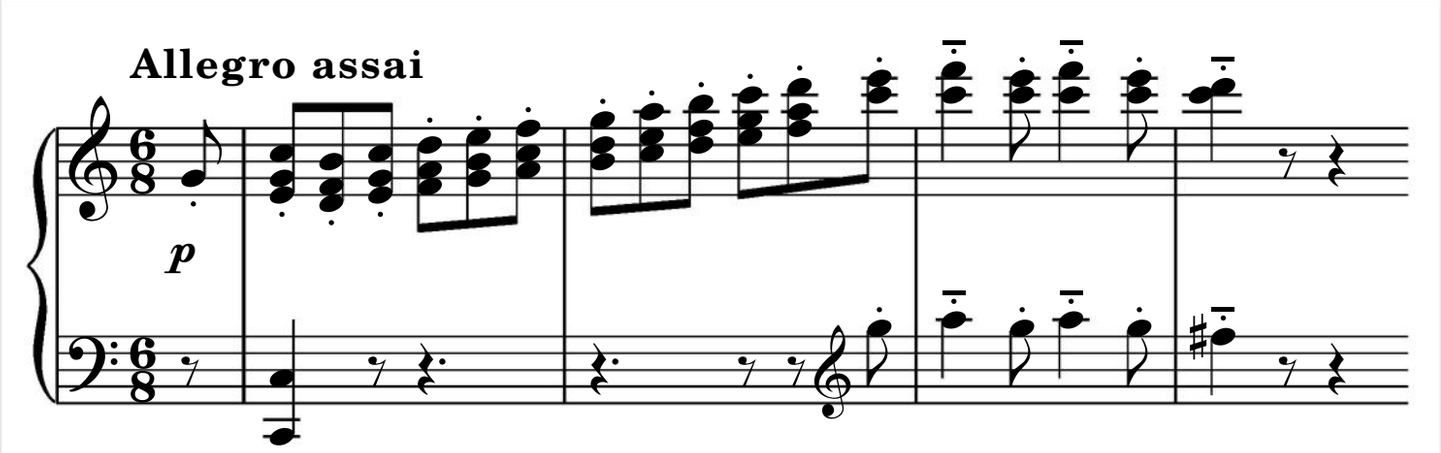
Upper and lower arm

Though in practice it can lead to a rather overtly percussive tone, playing 'from the elbow joint' in itself will make you more anatomically aware and conscious of lower-arm movement and its place in your technique. Moving the wrist and the lower arm as a single unit may be helpful if you tend, as many players do, to raise or lower the wrist at the precise moment that you play notes. Place a mirror next to the piano and look at how your wrist behaves at the moment a note sounds. Lack of alignment between the lower arm and wrist at the crucial moment when notes actually play can lead to injury. The wrist is placed under strain as it is not fully focused on the same direction as the arm. This leads not only to a lack of potential so far as sound production is concerned but also to potential wrist strain along the lines of tennis or golfer's elbow. To counter this, it is worthwhile practising scales in triads and slow octaves while observing your wrist-arm alignment in a standing mirror next to the instrument.

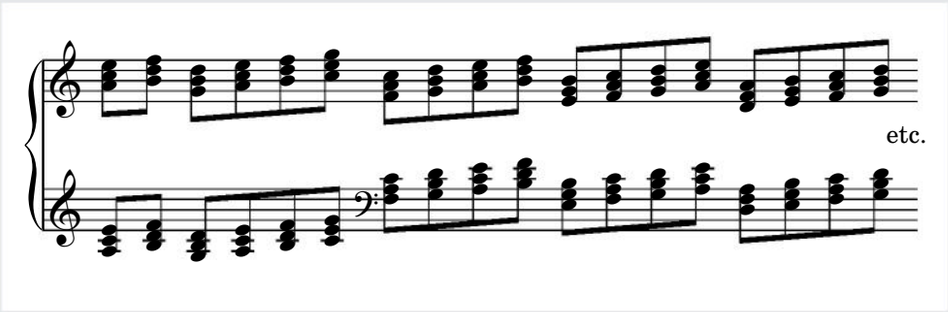
In contrast to lower-arm movement, engaging your upper arm should encourage a richer sound and lead naturally to an easier way of playing. Swing your arms from the shoulders, eliminating stiffness and tension. Begin slowly but build up speed without strain. If you can keep relaxed and 'flop' on to the piano with a sense that the weight is emanating from the upper rather than the lower arm, then you have discovered one of the most relaxed and relaxing ways to generate pianistic power. Arm weight can be difficult to understand and describe, but perhaps the easiest way to immediately experience it is to glue your fingers to the keys while lifting your arms up from the elbows, then drop down. It will take some time and experimentation for you to be able to allow notes to sound reliably without moving the fingers off the keys at all. Experiment with wrist and arm movement – but never lift the shoulders up. Find a way to retain concentration and coordination without becoming tight and stiff.

From the shoulders, from the torso

Pianistic power-building begins with body awareness. This is very important when it comes to playing from the shoulder or the torso. Though one should never lock the elbow joints, it is interesting to extend your arms and



Example 2 ••• *The finale of* ***Beethoven****'s Piano Sonata in C major, Op 2 No 3*

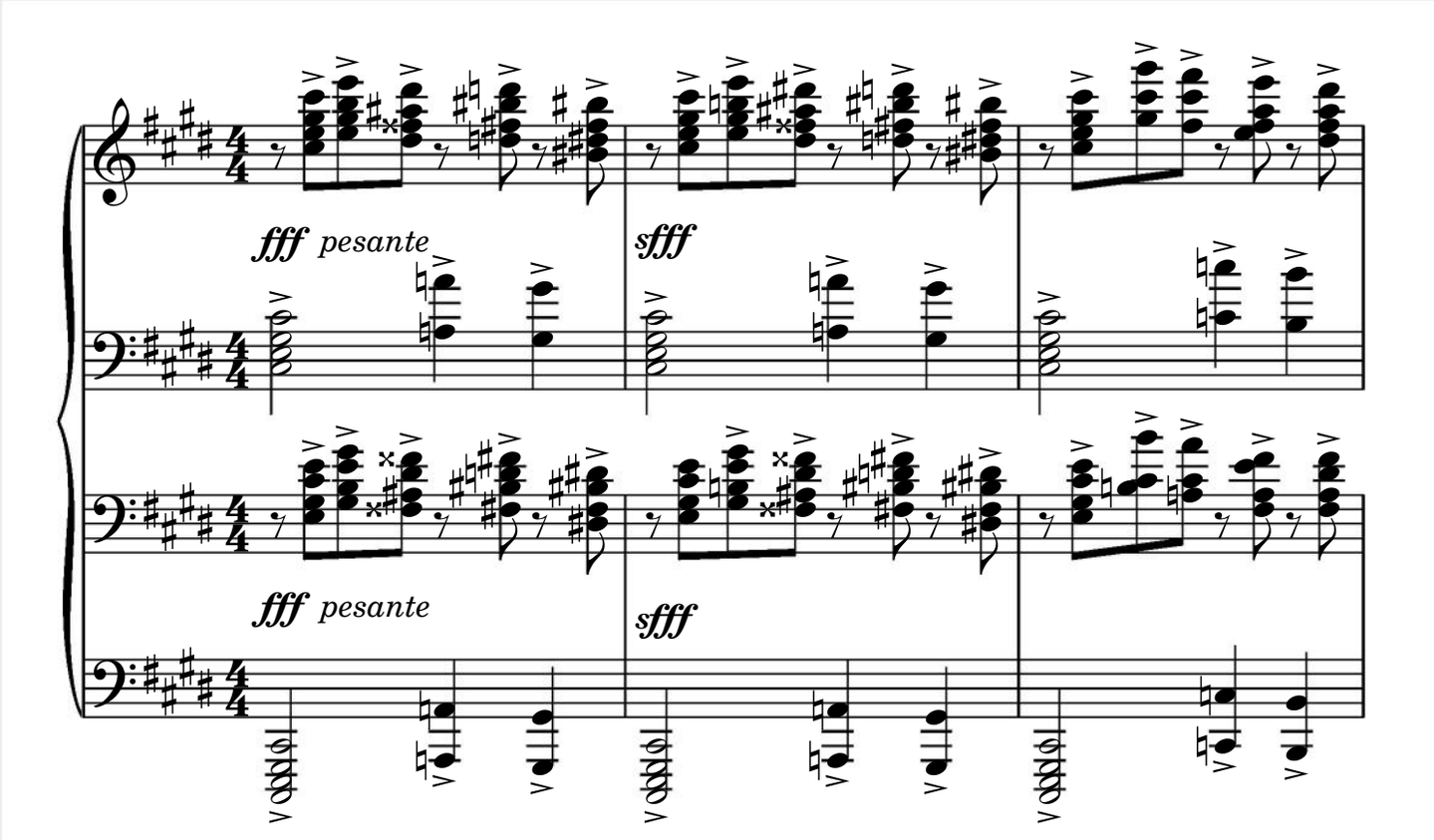


Example 3 ••• *An exercise in rising triads*

feel that the notes you are playing are coming from near the shoulder joints. While it would be wrong to play with raised shoulders, it can be most effective to feel that your fingers are not really involved in anything other than 'covering' the keys as you play. Of course, you can have groups of two, four or eight notes taken in any single 'shoulder thrust' movement – but we should always be cautious lest such an approach lead to vulgarity from over-accentuation. Example three below is a simple succession of triads. The telescopic practising outlined in previous instalments of this guide is useful for distilling effective and effective shoulder technique here. First begin with a different movement for each individual triad, then move on to playing two triads in a single movement (overlapping pedal may make this easier) then four.

Example 3 (above) can also be exploited for exploring core weight/emphasis in execution. As you sit at the piano with your legs naturally apart and feet splayed, push your ankles together without moving your legs. This should engage your quadriceps and firm up your glute muscles, strengthening your core. Can you play Example 3 feeling the impact of the triads from your core rather than your shoulders? Playing from the core is a wonderfully liberating way of eliminating shoulder and neck tension while also enabling you to feel the inner strength of execution. It is as though your lower body is totally engaged in the impact of your playing.

Catapulted weight from the feet

Though it may be foolhardy and wasteful in terms of energy literally to jump off the stool in order to play big chords, it is certainly desirable in the biggest musical moments to feel as though your weight and power are triggered upwards from your core through energetic impulses from your feet. As a pre-exercise workout to stimulate awareness of this, try sitting away from the piano in the squat position for a few seconds before pushing upwards from your feet. Feel a thrusting energetic movement that forces your torso upwards. In a similar way you should be able to execute massive chordal passages by pushing the energy upwards. Try to feel your feet catapulting forwards in the chords that mark the climax of Rachmaninov's celebrated C sharp minor Prelude (see Example 4, below) or the famous opening chords of Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto. Even if these works are considered too advanced for an adult returner, there is no harm in isolating a few excerpts for examination. It will certainly lead to lots of fun as well as new technical awareness. **IP**

Example 4 ••• *The chordal climax of* ***Rachmaninov****'s Prelude in C sharp minor, Op 3 No 2*

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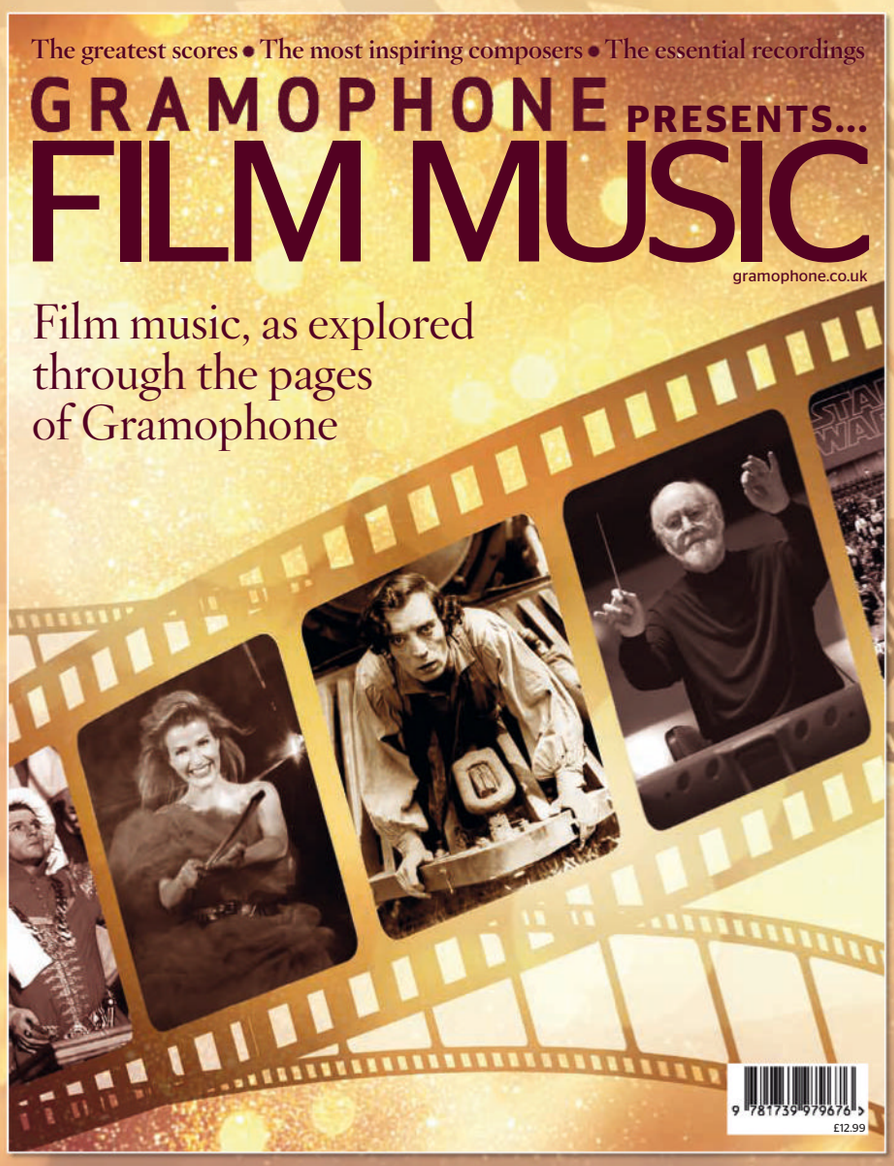

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Ede Poldini

Poupée valsante

BY JEREMY NICHOLAS

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Poldini is one of those rare composers whose music fared better on shellac than on vinyl and digital. We find pianists of the calibre of Mark Hambourg recording his *Étude de concert*, Op 19 No 2, back in 1913, Leopold Godowsky championing a rather insubstantial Waltz in F from his *Walzerbuch*, Op 42, in 1916, and Alfred Grünfeld and Leo Ornstein among others tackling his 'Marche mignonne' from *Trois morceaux*, Op 15. His *Étude japonaise*, Op 27 No 2, written in 1907, enjoyed a huge vogue for a time; it too appeared on a 78 (in 1921) courtesy of the American pianist Moissaye 'Bogie' Boguslawski and was dusted off again in 1999 by Noriko Ogawa on her enchanting album 'Japonisme' (BIS1045). All these pieces are typical of their composer: elegant salon pieces for the piano which form the majority of his 156 opus numbers.

None, though, achieved the popularity of his 'Poupée valsante' (known as 'Die tanzende Puppe' in German and 'The Waltzing Doll' or 'Dancing Doll' in English). It first appeared as the second of seven pieces in a collection entitled *Marionettes*, published by Ricordi without an opus number in 1895 and dedicated to the great conductor Arthur Nikisch. The other six titles – 'Baladin', 'Une amourette cachée', 'Les irrésistibles', 'Haute noblesse', 'Malade à mort' and 'Finale' – have, sadly, yet to find an advocate on record.

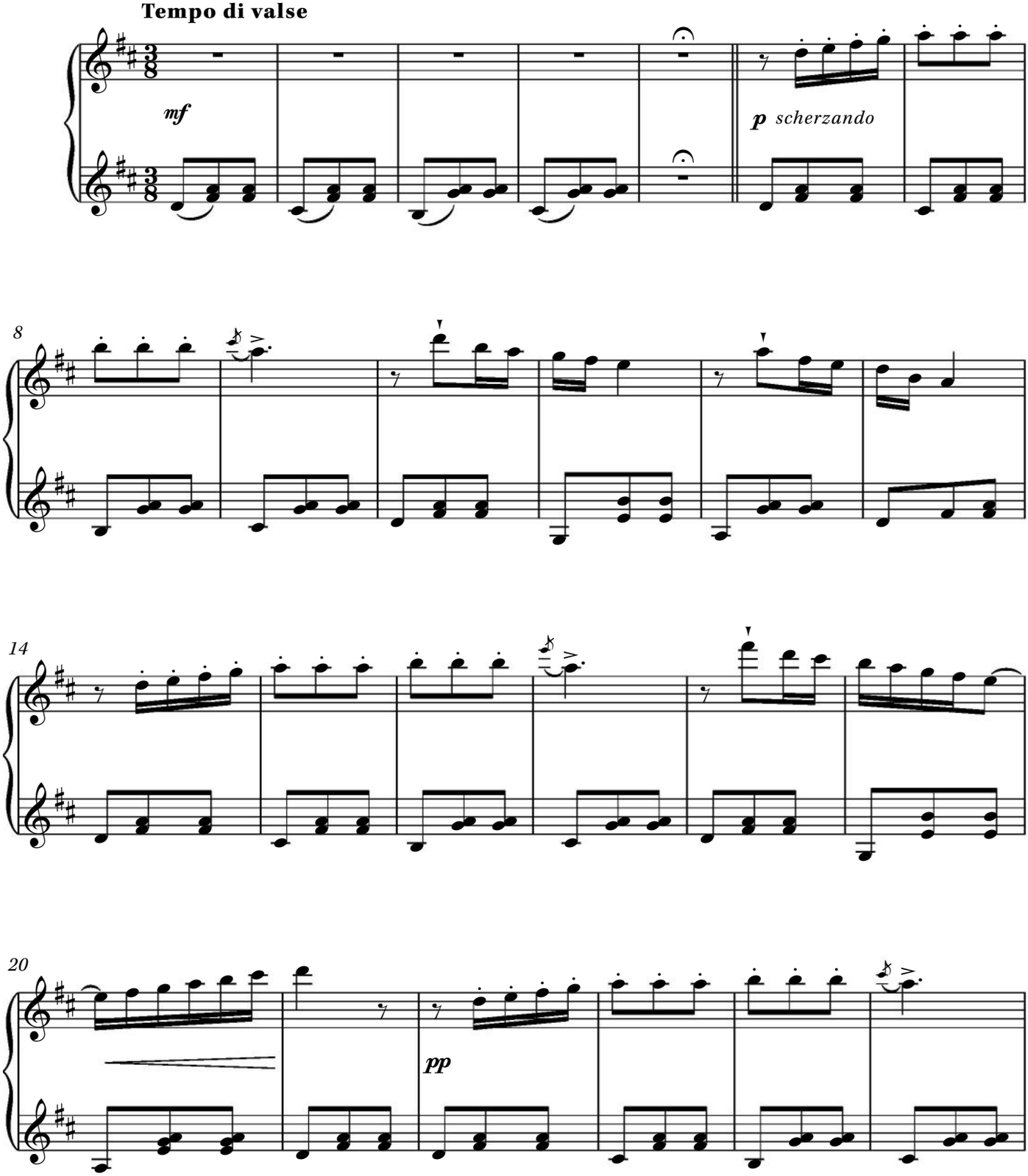
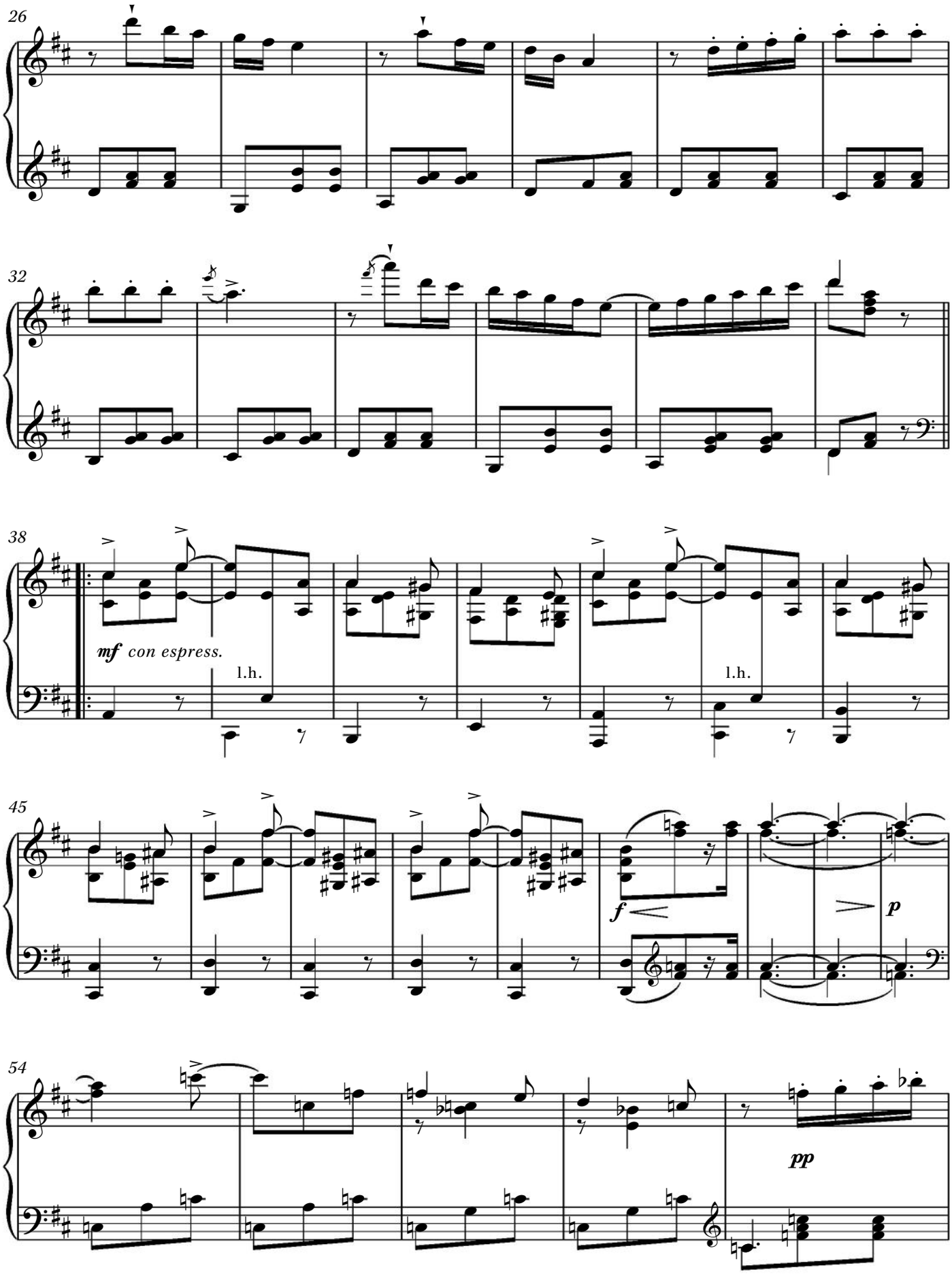
'Poupée valsante' made up for their neglect. Alfred Grünfeld, Rudolf Ganz, William Murdoch and Alexander Borowsky all made 78rpm recordings of it, but it was the arrangement of it for violin and piano by Fritz Kreisler that turned it into Poldini's biggest earner. Thibaud, Milstein, Perlman and Midori (as well, of course, as Kreisler himself – twice) are among the star names that took up the piece as a perfect little encore. There is also a vocal arrangement of it by Frank La Forge, a stratospheric vocalise that was recorded by the incomparable Lily Pons, accompanied by the orchestra led by her husband André Kostelanetz – **youtu.be/BFLpn8Kx0Lg**

The original piano solo is technically fairly straightforward but it relies entirely on the imagination of the player to make it sing. Played with a straight face and no rubato, the dancing doll can become very flat-footed. The best modern recording is by Philip Martin (Hyperion CDH55410), made in 2002 with – full disclosure – a booklet note by the present writer.

What of the composer? Ede (or Eduard) Poldini was born in Budapest on 13 June 1869, and studied at the Budapest Conservatory before moving to Vienna for lessons in theory with Eusebius Mandyczewski and piano with Julius Epstein (Gustav Mahler was among his other pupils). Apart from piano pieces, he was well known for his comic operas including *The Vagabond and the Princess* (1903) and *The Carnival Marriage* (1924), the latter presented in London as *Love Adrift* (1926). Having moved to Vevey in Switzerland in 1908, he died in Corseaux on 28 June 1957. **IP**

Poupée valsante

Ede Poldini

1869 – 1957

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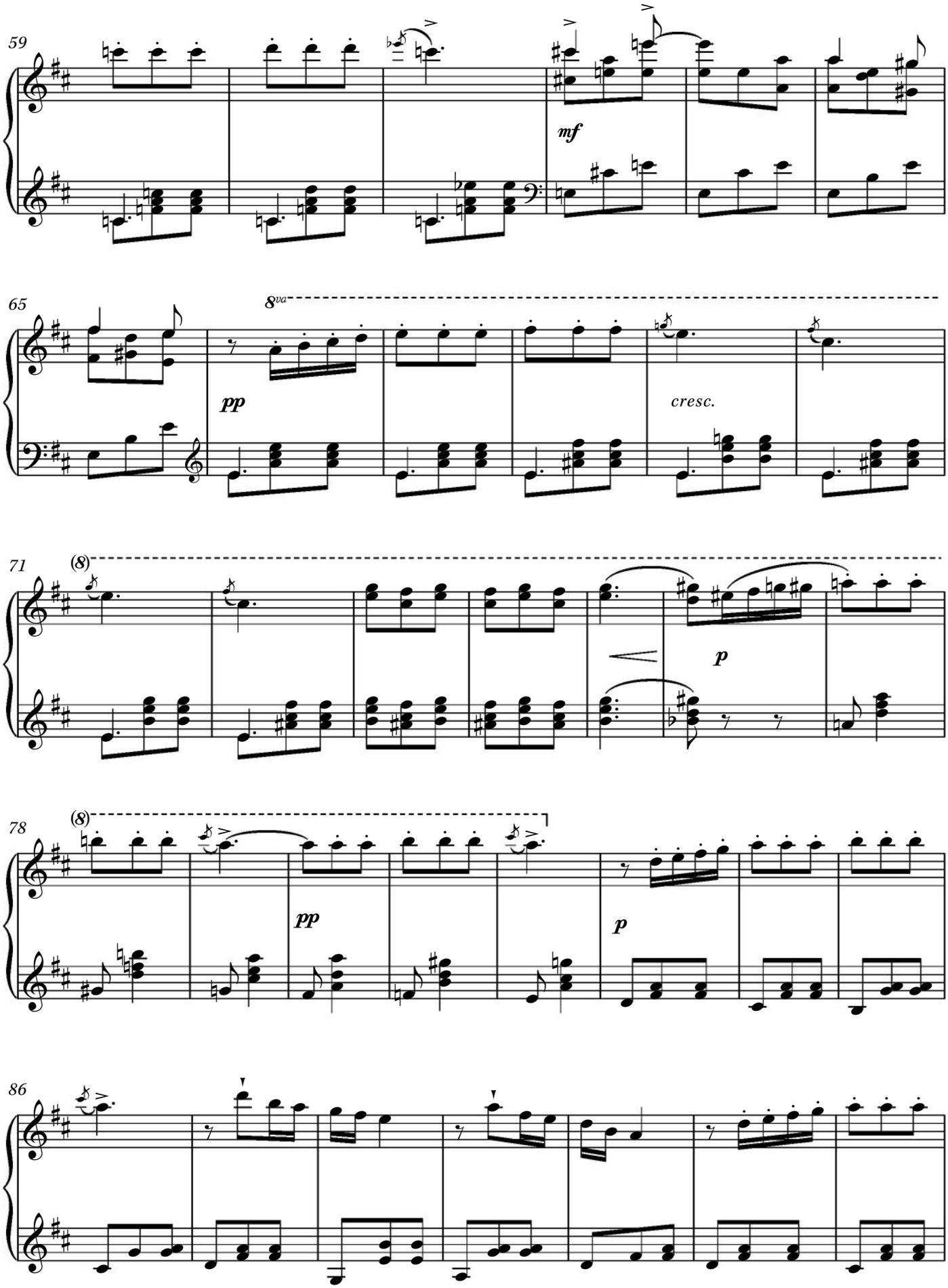
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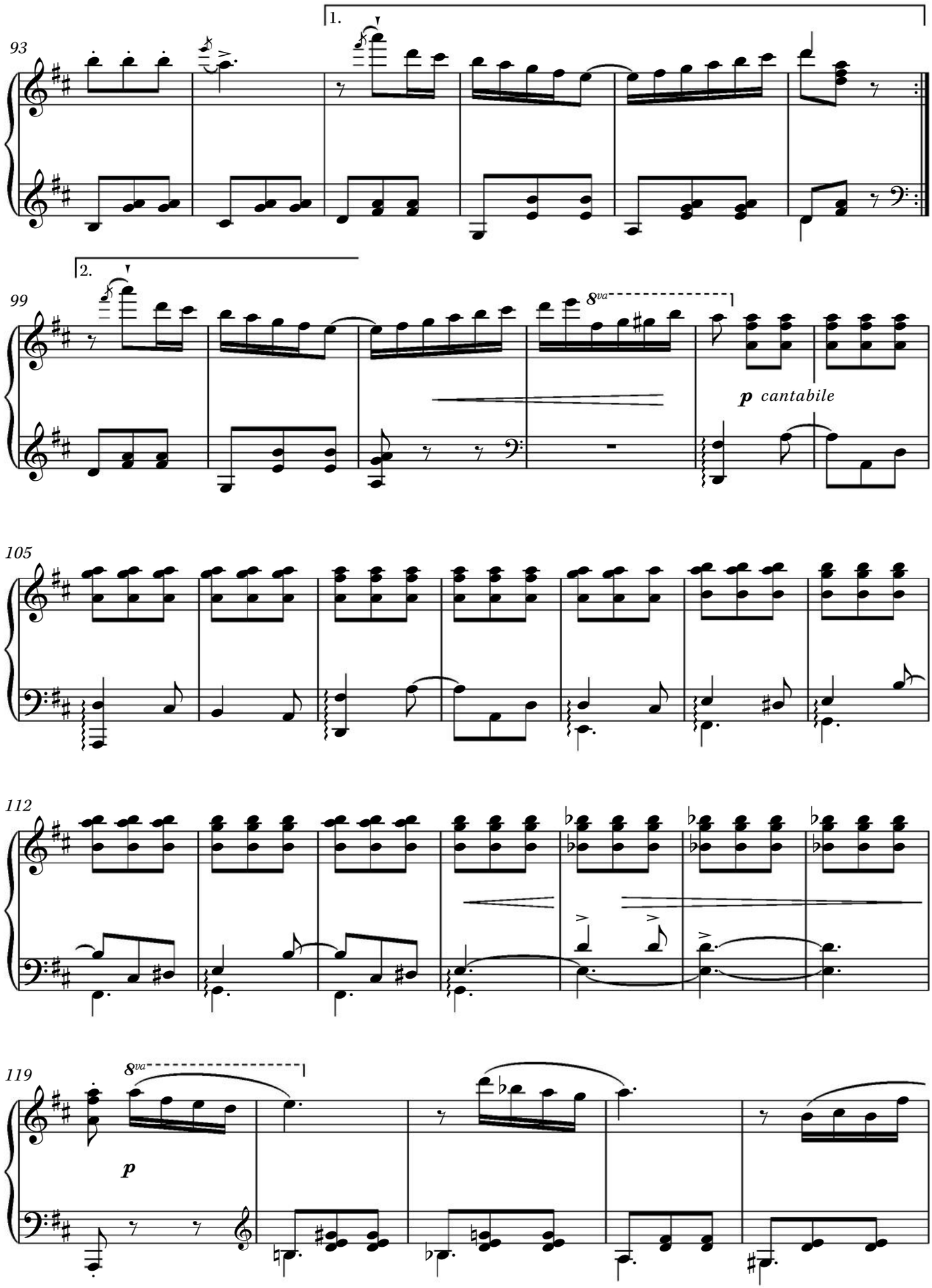
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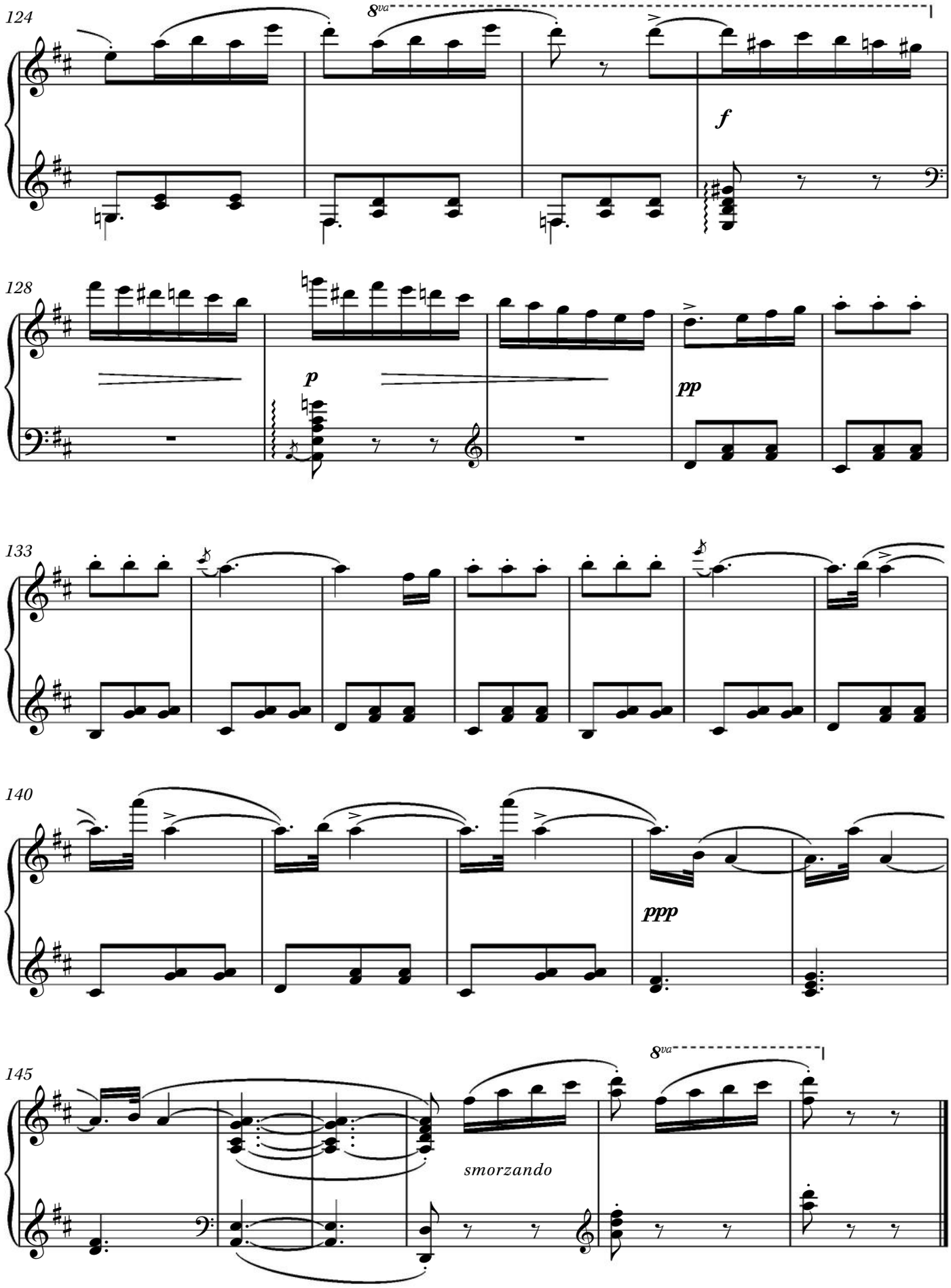
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José Iturbi: did he become 'famous for being famous'?

TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

From Hollywood to the World

An elegant box-set celebrates the glamorous career of the pianist and conductor – and sometime film star – José Iturbi, as well as his pianist sister Amparo. **Bryce Morrison** assesses a distinctive legacy

A quick glance at this lavish 16-disc tribute to José Iturbi (1895-1980) and his arguably more gifted sister Amparo (1898-1969) prompts a mixed response. Did a clearly ranking pianist and glamorous persona, hardly backwards in coming forwards, succumb to the lure of Tinseltown and follow the 'primrose path of dalliance', so that although his star shone brightly (as did his bank balance), this came at some musical cost? Or were his many gifts (pianist first, but also conductor, composer and, finally, film star) an example of a fullness and richness that leapt across boundaries to bring joy and wonder to thousands? True, all lovers of celebrated pianists will have sizeable tributes on their shelves (celebrating Rubinstein, Horowitz, Arrau and so on), but the difference here is that what is being celebrated is a superstardom that outshone and exceeded the actual playing. People remembered the name rather than the performance. As with, say, Eileen Joyce and Van Cliburn (for *Time* magazine, 'Horowitz and Liberace all rolled into one'), José Iturbi became famous for being famous. But unlike those two key pianists, where excessive exposure led to a steep decline in quality, Iturbi, displaying formidable physical resilience, maintained his dizzying schedule of concerts into his eighties.

At the same time, Iturbi's repertoire dwindled in range as his celebrity increased. Works such as Liszt's 12 *Transcendental Études*, Brahms's 'Paganini' Variations and Fauré's Theme and Variations, Op 73, were replaced by 'those you love' popular classics. No point in frightening the horses or risking reducing the size of your capacity audiences. What is regrettable is that both Albéniz's *Iberia* and Granados's *Goyescas* (twin peaks of the Spanish keyboard repertoire) are absent from Iturbi's programmes – he left recording the complete *Goyescas* to his sister. Instead we have many examples of what might be called picture-postcard Spain, a reminder, even given Iturbi's pugnacious brilliance, that all that glitters is not gold.

So where does this vast array of performances leave us, and how in our very different times do we perceive Iturbi's legacy? First, I should say that his duo and two-piano performances with his sister Amparo are among the most striking successes. The siblings are bright-eyed, brisk and bustling in Mozart's E flat major Concerto, K365, and in the D major Sonata, K448. They take Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* – heard in Iturbi's two-piano arrangement – by storm, and if the eerie play of light and shade in Debussy's *En blanc et noir* lies outside their scope, there is a sense that Iturbi's touches of aggression and impatience are being kept in check by his sister's more disciplined presence. How, I wonder, would Amparo have responded to Iturbi's conclusion to the *Largo* from Beethoven's Third Concerto, to his disconcerting baldness in those magical ascents? An overall feeling that Iturbi was happiest when his fingers had plenty to do is confirmed by his recordings of Liszt's First Concerto (even if his opening comes across as the musical equivalent of an outsize hiccup), Mendelssohn's G minor Concerto and Liszt's *Hungarian Fantasy*. Although less than subtle, the sheer physical bravura is ear-catching – you are made aware that here is a pianist who despite his endless stream of engagements put in four hours of practice, particularly technical practice, every day.

In solo items Iturbi's performances vary from testy to displaying flashes of inwardness. Much of Schumann's *Arabeske* is garrulous and insensitive, and there is little beyond gestures by rote in Beethoven's *Für Elise*, with an added mix of violence and diffidence. The virtuoso cascades of Saint-Saëns's *Allegro appassionato* leave you in no doubt that he could get around the keyboard; indeed, you

The sheer physical bravura of José Iturbi's playing is ear-catching

TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

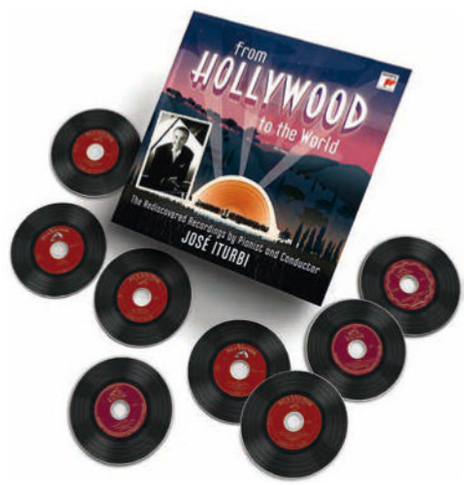
are left marvelling at his facility. Chopin was always central to Iturbi's repertoire but the results are again uneven, making it hard to forgive a misread rhythm in the A flat major Polonaise (no small failing when you consider the basic pulse that lies at the heart of this ceremonial and heroic dance). There is a glib start to the B flat minor Scherzo (no sense of Chopin's macabre instruction, so we understand from Wilhelm von Lenz, that it must evoke a charnel house) and too often thunder and lightning replace more intimate or confiding virtues. Exceptions to external display occur, perhaps surprisingly, in Debussy's *Rêverie* and the two *Arabesques*.

Elsewhere there are show-stoppers aplenty. Carlos Guastavino's *Gato* is a feline titbit. We also have waltz and boogie versions of *Three Blind Mice* (happily oblivious to the nursery rhyme's casual cruelty) and Morton Gould's *Symphonette* No 4, the *Latin-American* (in four movements: Rhumba, Tango, Guaracha and Conga). At the other end of the spectrum, we hear Iturbi the conductor with the Rochester and Valencia symphony orchestras, more energetic than finely detailed in Mendelssohn's *Scottish* and Dvořák's *New World* Symphonies. With still more largesse, he can be heard partnering soprano Consuelo Rubio in a vivid performance of Falla's *Seven Popular Spanish Songs*.

Let us turn to Amparo Iturbi, who Sony's fulsome essay claims studied with her brother in order to achieve an approximation of his stature. José Iturbi admitted Amparo was the better pianist, and listening to her in Granados's *Goyescas* you are inclined to agree. She is spirited in *El pelele*, the encore of the set as it were, subtitled 'Escena goyesca', depicting the joyous tossing of a straw dummy, and throughout she recreates all of the music's passion beneath its decorative surface, its mix of bitterness and grace, 'the voluptuous sense of passing the fingers through masses of richly coloured jewels' (in Ernest Newman's memorable words). Only Alicia de Larrocha surpasses her in coloration (where her wondrous pedal technique plays such a major part), although she of course has the advantage of modern sound. Yet it says something for Amparo Iturbi that her playing transcends the hard and restricted recorded sound. Elsewhere, beyond Spanish repertoire, she is brisk and astringent in Ravel's *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (the opening came as a shock to the system for the composer's first listeners). There is more energy than grace in Fauré's Third Impromptu, but she is at her very best in Chabrier's rough humour, most notably in the *Bourrée fantasque* and the 10 *Pièces pittoresques*.

Amparo's early death was a grievous loss to her brother; they were a seemingly insoluble partnership both personally and professionally. Combined with the suicide of Iturbi's wife and later of his daughter, this inevitably clouded a glittering career and ambience (the many outstanding photographs include him duetting with Rubinstein and with President Truman, and show his short, stocky figure standing next to Paderewski). Life was not altogether what it seemed, and Iturbi's tantrums in the recording studio were as legendary as his severity as a teacher (students referred to him as 'the Spanish Inquisition'). Perhaps, above all, there was a deep-rooted insecurity: 'all the time I worry I'm not good enough'. But although many questions arise, Sony's beautifully presented box (following APR's more modest three-disc set of 'The Victor & HMV Solo Recordings') is an undeniable reminder of a legend and of qualities that surfaced intermittently, above and beyond Hollywood. **IP**

From Hollywood to the World: The Rediscovered RCA Victor Recordings
José Iturbi
Sony Classical 19439 83650-2 (16 discs)



The piano showed me the way: Luisa Imorde abandoned medicine for music

NIKOLAJ LUND

Unusual couplings

Having recorded piano concertos by Clara Schumann and Weber, Luisa Imorde talks to **Jeremy Nicholas** about her love for creative musical combinations

In order to stand out in a very crowded market place, every pianist needs a USP. Especially if you are embarking on your career. And when you have won no major competition. And when you are not signed to a major international label. As was the case with the German pianist Luisa Imorde.

Her USP as a recording artist is her imaginative couplings of unlikely composers. How about Couperin with Messiaen, for example? Or, for her debut recording for the Ars Produktion label, Robert Schumann with Jörg Widmann (born 1973, and whose piano concerto, *Trauermarsch*, Imorde has championed)? Or JS Bach and Kapustin? 'The Schott Verlag has taken over the publication of all Kapustin's works,' she tells me from her home in Cologne. 'I worked closely with them in order to choose which works I should record for the CD. They allowed me to use a link to view all the manuscripts that they own. These included some that had not yet been published. That's how I came to make the first recording of his last work, *Moon Rainbow*. Kapustin's wife told us she played the CD for him in hospital, a few months before his death.'

Luisa Imorde's exclusive contract with Berlin Classics began in February 2019. 'It had been my favourite label for a long time anyway, and I kept on asking if I could record for them. I already had the programmes in my head and knew I could offer them good things.' The first album was called 'L'affaire d'honneur', which recalled the 1798 piano duel between Beethoven and the Salzburg-born Joseph Wölfl, three years his junior, held in the Villa Xaipe, in Vienna – which was where the recording was made. (The programme also includes a two-piano arrangement of Mozart's *Adagio and Fugue* in C minor, K546, in which Imorde was joined by her erstwhile teacher Jacques Rouvier.) 'They had never heard of Wölfl before and till today I have the freedom to choose every piece for my CD, which is not normal for an exclusive contract, I think, but I really love it.'

The principal reason for our meeting (on Zoom) is to talk about her latest recording, which pairs Weber and Clara Schumann. Imorde laughs and smiles her way through the conversation, frequently apologising for her more than adequate English. ('Normally I love to express myself in a chosen way but it's difficult to do that in English. But I'll try.') Before she made the recording, she had never heard Weber's First Concerto. 'It was really a surprise for me that he had written two piano concertos and the *Konzertstück*, that nobody plays them in the concert hall. Nobody knows them! Also, as a pianist it was really interesting to play this music. Pianists never play his music and nobody seems to like it. And the First Piano Concerto is really good music. I chose the Clara Schumann for much the same reason. I didn't know that she had written such a piece so it was really nice to find it, listen to it and admire it.'

For how long, I ask, had she had these concertos in her fingers before the recording? Were they learnt specially for the occasion? 'To record the two concertos was a kind of spontaneous decision. I had only two and a half months to prepare them. It was a very intense time. Also for the conductor and even for the orchestra it was completely new repertoire. Nobody had played the pieces before and we had only three and a half days to record the two concertos. It was a kind of sporty thing to manage it!'

Imorde did not need me to remind her that the solo part of Weber's First Concerto is not easy. 'Yes,' she agrees. 'We tried to show all the details. The first thing I said to the conductor [Marie Jacquot] was we had to find a tempo that allowed us to show everything. The recordings I heard before were too fast in certain passages. I couldn't understand the little colours between the bars. I think we found a good compromise because the conductor wanted to go faster and faster – for her and the orchestra, it's easier to play bigger and faster. It's also difficult in that it's a transitional work between the Classical and Romantic eras and we wanted to show the freedom of the Romantic parts but balance it with Classical restraint.'

I wondered whether the orchestra, the Bremer Philharmoniker, enjoyed playing the Weber? 'Yes,' she replies cautiously, 'but we had another difficulty because we had the beautiful new edition of the concerto and we had to tell the orchestra every new detail of phrasing and bowing. It was a bit delicate to communicate,' she laughs. 'The orchestra was playing from what was not only an old edition but a bad edition.'

These changes, she reveals, had to be made in the sessions. 'There was a misunderstanding

JULIA WESELY

Eclectic repertoire: Luisa Imorde champions little-known music from all periods

and they were not well prepared. But that's the normal thing with German orchestras: they are there when you start but not before! It was a hard job to do but afterwards I think everybody was very proud of what we achieved. Everybody listened to what we played and so … we built a new house!'

The Clara Schumann, too, was new to conductor and orchestra. This has received a flurry of recordings in the past few years. But Imorde points out that she was not following any trend. 'Both recordings are old,' she tells me. 'They were made in 2017, the Schumann for Clara's bicentenary [in 2019].' The reasons for the delay in releasing this with the Weber are complicated, involving a change of plan by the label, the death of the sound engineer and the difficulty of retrieving the digital masters. Imorde also recorded Weber's Second Piano Concerto and the *Konzertstück* in 2020 but with a different orchestra. She was, she says, not happy with the result. It is unlikely that anyone will get to hear them.

Another major point of interest for this recording is the inclusion of five of Clara Schumann's 13 transcriptions of her husband's songs. 'I love them all. I don't like the Liszt versions so much,' Imorde admits. In addition to these five songs, she has added four little waltzes by Weber. Why not some of the virtuoso works – *Momento capriccioso*, *Rondo brillante* or even *Invitation to the Dance*? 'No, I don't find the musical content of those so interesting and I was looking for shorter works.' So big, flashy showpieces and opera transcriptions are not for her? 'No – I can be honest. I searched in the music of Clara Schumann, too, thinking I could find some small pieces and I have to say I don't like them. I have played the Liszt *Norma* Fantasy. It's fun to play but it's not really good music!'

At this point in our conversation, the Zoom timing ran out. I scheduled another session immediately to find that we had now been joined by Luisa's daughter Marguerite, nearly one year old and the younger of her two daughters (the other, Muriel, is three) with her husband of three years, piano restorer/technician Christian Schoke.

Luisa herself was born in 1989 in Bielefeld but grew up in the 'super-small village of Kleinfischbach'. She began playing the piano when she was three ('I think'). Both her parents are pianists. 'My mother taught piano at home and my father practised at home a lot. Every day children came to have lessons with my mum, so at the time I really thought everybody played the piano. So for me it was normal to play every day a little bit and practise every day a little bit, because I thought that's what everybody did at home. So it was a life with music, which then became a love. Then I went to Bonn, one hour away from Kleinfischbach, where I spent the last three years of school and was able to complete the first terms as a young student at the Cologne University of Music parallel to school.'

After this, she spent some time studying medicine with the vague intention of becoming a doctor but abandoned her degree when she went to study at the Mozarteum Salzburg with Jacques Rouvier ('a really great teacher'). With no facility to simultaneously continue with medicine, she abandoned her doctoral ambitions in favour of the piano. 'The piano showed me the way,' she says. 'I'm really lucky with the decision I made. I trust my piano! I played a few competitions. It was OK but not that interesting. I don't think it is the best way to make music and by then I was lucky enough to have a record label.'

As our conversation continued it was accompanied by a new experience for this writer. After many hundreds of interviews with musicians, it was the first time that any interviewee had breast-fed an infant while being interviewed. While we continued chatting, Marguerite suckled happily before promptly falling back into her mother's arms in a deep sleep. It was all rather charming.

In 2015 Imorde gave the Austrian premieres of two concertos by Elliott Carter during the Salzburg Mozart Week. Does she have a preference for music that engages the intellect rather than the emotions? 'No. Emotion in music is very important to me. I cannot play a piece if I don't love it. I had the chance to play the Carter works; I like the music, I like to play them here and there – but not every day. Last year I played the Penderecki Piano Concerto, *Resurrection* [at the Vienna Konzerthaus and Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie], and I really love it. Of course, you have to struggle with the notes but in the end it's a big piece that really touches people. The audience loved it. The Carter not so much! But as young musicians we have a duty to play the stuff from today, to support the composers of today. There are so many composers and we play only a small amount. So if we play a little bit every year – even though the music might not always be to my taste – for me it's really important.'

What's next? 'I am looking right now at 11 books of music by Froberger. So many pieces for piano, some with funny titles. It's good music. I am working on it very hard at the moment. And I would like to put Froberger and Brahms together, because Brahms loved Baroque music. I don't know. We'll see.' She reveals that there is also the possibility of recording the rarely heard Piano Concerto by Massenet. I wonder with which composer the enterprising Ms Imorde will pair him. **IP**

Luisa Imorde's recording of Weber and Clara Schumann is on Berlin Classics and will be reviewed in the next issue

Critics' choice

Chopin Ballades Nos 1-4, Scherzos Nos 1-4
Marianna Shirinyan *pf*
Orchid Classics ORC100248

Chopin's Ballades and Scherzos, spanning his development from 1831 to 1843, from the Warsaw Uprising to George Sand and the Nohant years, severely test a pianist's artistry and credentials. Marianna Shirinyan – Armenian-born, Scandinavian-based – studied with Igor Javrian at the Komitas Music Conservatory, Yerevan, and with Konrad Elser at the Musikhochschule Lübeck. She meets the challenge spectacularly, commanding each with a lofty sense of narrative and landscape. Prioritising tone and architecture, the Ballades, finely grained, deal in expansive lyricism, basaltic cliffs and high-octane finish, hair,s-breadth cadences, aria and dramatic canvas being of the essence. Such tales they might harbour Chopin kept to himself but Shirinyan allures us with fantastical glints and voicings. Her Scherzos royally take on a century of reference recordings – aristocratic pianism and maturity of insight in bronzed harness, the old dance-and-trio format Chopin inherited charioteered to burning heights. She finds unexpected details, her left hand probing and emphatic in the First. The treacherous slopes of the Second (re-transition into the reprise not least) are exultantly tackled, freed of speed-inducing tension. The Third's symphonicism and gearing are magnificent. Questioning handed-down 'fairy' images, elegance before eggshells, the Fourth speaks with full-throated generosity, the nuanced ballade-like middle section and stentorian sweep of the closing pages running the gamut of Romantic ardour. A benchmark release, strikingly produced (Bernhard Güttler, Royal Danish Academy of Music).

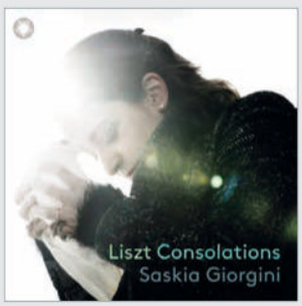
ATEŞ ORGA

Liszt Études d'exécution transcendante 'Live from the Cliburn'
Yunchan Lim *pf*
Steinway & Sons STNS30217

Times have changed. What was once considered unplayable is now something for an increasing number of young pianists to take in their fearless stride. And few more fearless performances can have been heard in a piano competition than 18-year-old Yunchan Lim's semi-final programme of Liszt's formidable *Transcendental Études*, a thrilling account now released on disc.

What aplomb Lim brings to the opening C major curtain-raiser, what fierce clarity to the intricate patterning of the following A minor. There are reminders, too, that these are studies in lyricism as well as bravura, notably in 'Paysage', 'Ricordanza' and 'Harmonies du soir', and Lim's way with the second of these will surely ease any worries of poetic limitation, of an exclusive concern with high-wire acts and muscle-bound physicality. Lim gloriously evokes Busoni's description of 'a packet of yellowed love letters', though these are characteristically searing as well as grateful memories. Elsewhere his command is as unfaltering as it is head-spinning, ablaze with strength and savagely fast tempos that few would risk, especially in a live competition setting. The violent miasma of sound in the cadenza before the principal subject of 'Mazeppa,' rather than a mere upward rush of notes, is among many audacious features, and if his 'Feux follets' reveals prize-winning virtuosity more than musical subtlety it is never less than astonishing, a nonchalant dismissal of its notorious

ALBUM OF THE MONTH



Liszt 'Consolations'
Consolations, S172; Caprices-valses, S214; Valse-impromptu, S213; Liebestraüme, S541; Deux Légendes, S175
Saskia Giorgini *pf*
Pentatone PTC5187 045

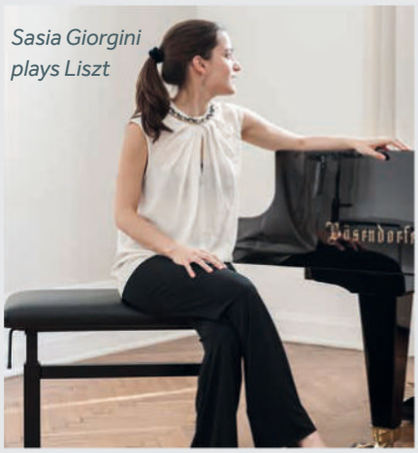
By titling her Liszt album 'Consolations', Saskia Giorgini tells of her love for the more intimate side of Liszt's multifaceted genius, his withdrawal from public scrutiny, from a scandalous private life and acclaim as the ultimate virtuoso pianist into a cloistered world of calm and reflection. The *Consolations* themselves might appeal to the gifted amateur, but Giorgini's performance is of such a consummate musical grace and affection that the music is elevated light years away from such a consideration.

The three *Caprices-Valses* that follow are a wide leap from such confidentiality to a worldly-wise mix of elements; teasing, hectoring, radiant or bittersweet in the opening 'Valse de bravoure', where Giorgini is faithful to every rapid change of direction, to the element of 'caprice'. She captures the wistful waltz memory of the 'Valse mélancolique', its nostalgia foreshadowing the later enigmatic *Valses oubliées*, and she has all of the necessary virtuoso aplomb for the wildness of the concluding 'Valse de concert sur deux motifs de Lucia et Parisina de Donizetti'. She then returns to Liszt at his most amiable and

difficulty. A startlingly abrupt tearing off of phrases in 'Vision' and an idiosyncratic way with the central poetry of 'Harmonies du soir' are compensated by swathes of uproarious and explosive grandeur. Finally, Lim's steely command leads to an unforgettable evocation in 'Chasse-neige', that dark close to the opus and prophecy of Impressionism.

It is impossible to resist adding that if Lim's prodigious showing at the Cliburn Competition prompted questions about his range and musical scope, these were triumphantly answered at London's Wigmore Hall in January, when he played a no less superlative recital of music by Dowland, Bach and Beethoven.

BRYCE MORRISON



beguiling in the *Valse-impromptu* before taking us to the very heart of the three *Liebesträume*, where her playing is gloriously free and uninhibited, her vocal line sung with heart-rending emotional warmth.

Finally to the two *Legends*, and even if Giorgini hardly erases memories of Wilhelm Kempff in his early Decca recording of both these pieces (has any other pianist cast a more luminous or aptly spiritual shimmer across the birdsong and St Francis's stern rejoinder in No 1?), there is no denying her unswerving authority. No fear of St Francis going under the water in the second *Legend* as he makes his perilous journey across the Straits of Messina, even when Giorgini unleashes the most ferocious and awe-inspiring of storms – a true sense of the elements' rage. In sum, Liszt-playing of this order of poetic richness and immediacy is rare indeed and Giorgini's recording should be in the possession of those who call Liszt's stature into doubt.

BRYCE MORRISON

'Ek-stasis – Dionysus, Nymphs and Satyrs'
Zoe Samsarelou *pf*
Divine Art DDX21237 (2 CDs)

Zoe Samsarelou does not lack ambition. Over nearly two and a half hours, 'Ek-stasis' takes a long-range view of Dionysus from his mythical or cult status, via his ritualistic and historical connotations, to his influence on Western civilisation across some two and a half millennia.

For this purpose, the two-dozen works represented here have been grouped into 10 categories – each (more or less) chronological in itself – that between them illustrate those successive stages of the Dionysian process. Essentially it involves continuous passage from the physical to the abstract, and if the actual music might not always seem to embody this directly, there is rarely any doubt as to the appropriateness of its wider context, nor of the light shed through juxtaposing pieces that are neglected these days or have simply fallen out of the repertoire.

The journey begins at 'Seduction' – initiated by a pert number from François Dandrieu and continuing with the proto-Impressionist sensuality of Déodat de Séverac, then the pan-tonal obliqueness of Dimitri Terzakis. 'Pathos' (seen as a concept rather than an emotion) takes in another incisive Dandrieu vignette, heading to the inward anguish of what is almost Dukas's last utterance, then the physicality of a piece from the multifaceted suite *Mediterranean Desert* of Giorgos Koumendakis. 'Illusion' is framed by a 'satiric' item from Couperin and a heady aphorism by Lina Tonia; between comes Debussy's trailblazing *Prélude à L'après-midi d'un faune* in the revelatory transcription by Leonard Borwick. Couperin at his most bracing starts 'Metamorphosis', also taking in the most evocative from Mischa Levitzki's handful of encores and a no less affecting miniature by Nikos Skalkottas. A 'Bacchic prelude and toccata' from Couperin begins 'Transcendence', followed by the enveloping richness of Florent Schmitt and a coursing miniature by Nestor Taylor, before the hieratic tones of further late Skalkottas brings up a nominal intermission.

Rameau at his most inventive launches 'Instinct', followed by an unexpectedly visceral dance from Massenet's forgotten opera *Bacchus* and a lively character-study by Sergei Bortkiewicz – ending with more capriciousness courtesy of Terzakis. Moving on to 'Catharsis', the tensile elegance of Louis-Claude Daquin precedes two of Debussy's alluring *Épigraphes antiques*, as heard in the latter's solo transcription, and followed with a vividly descriptive genre piece by Dimitris Marangopoulos. The next two categories are each represented with just one collection apiece. 'Mythos' comes in the guise of *Pictures from Greece* by Harry Farjeon, chiefly remembered as a pedagogue but whose artful miniatures are worth reviving, while 'Paradox' is illumined by the cycle *Satyre und Nymphen* from Paul Juon – once referred to as the 'Russian Brahms' but whose engaging and often imaginative studies ally more closely with comparable pieces by Schumann or Tchaikovsky. Finally to 'Transition' – embodied in the elemental rhetoric of an item from *Row Rocks* by Aspasia Nasopoulou, which brings about the unequivocal close.

Throughout her epic recital, Samsarelou is the capable and informed exponent of music that often gains from being heard in this narrative context. This is especially true of those pieces taken from collections by Baroque masters (eminently suited to the piano in any case), while those by contemporary Greek composers should help in the disseminating of their music to a wider listenership. As recorded, her Fazioli has clarity and definition but is lacking in dynamic light and shade, and some may find the occasional sound of the sustaining pedal being depressed distracting.

Of course, it is entirely feasible to look beyond the unifying concept of this collection, further detailed by the pianist in her booklet note and in the 'Personal Touch' feature on page 22, and enjoy each of the pieces on its own terms – yet however one chooses to approach it, an enlightening experience is there for the taking.

RICHARD WHITEHOUSE

SOLO REPERTOIRE

Debussy Estampes; Images – Rondes de printemps (transcribed G Gasparian); Préludes – Book 1
Jean-Paul Gasparian *pf*
Naïve V7958

Jean-Paul Gasparian is Parisian born and bred, the son of two musicians. This is his fifth recording and his first for Naïve. Gasparian's approach to Debussy is bracingly direct and masculine, replete with nuance and colour. His tempos are generally relaxed, as though not to miss any scintillating fragrance or beguiling taste. One of the most remarkable attributes of this first book of *Préludes* is their extraordinary individuality, each speaking with a distinct voice. For instance, the heavily pedalled, mysterious sensuality of 'Voiles' gives way to an arid 'Le vent dans la plaine' that seems almost sinister. One so luxuriates in the Italian warmth of 'Les collines d'Anacapri' that the arrival at 'Des pas sur la neige' sends a chill. Which is to say, of course, that these performances, in the breadth and immediacy of their finely wrought imagination, achieve the effects that Debussy presumably intended.

Gasparian's deft terracing of dynamics lends 'Pagodes' an extraordinary sense of three dimensions. The Moorish atmosphere of the Alhambra is front and centre in this sultry reading of 'La soirée dans Grenade'. After the sweltering heat of southern Spain, 'Jardins sous la pluie' comes as invigorating refreshment. This is an *Estampes* conceived as a unit, exhibiting compelling cohesion and shape.

'Rondes de printemps', the third of the *Images* for orchestra, is heard here in a transcription by Gasparian's father, Gérard, from 2009, the centenary of Debussy's original. It is an interesting choice to follow 'Jardins sous la pluie', since both works make use of the folk song 'Nous n'irons plus au bois'. Gasparian is keen to reveal every detail of this richly evocative transcription, and overall it strikes as a worthy facsimile of the orchestral work.

PATRICK RUCKER

Hughes 'Bagatelles'
Matthew Mills *pf*
Divine Art DDX21107

Bernard Hughes (born 1974), currently composer-in-residence at St Paul's Girls School in London (where Holst famously taught), is probably best known for his music for children – at least in my house, thanks to his hugely enjoyable setting of David McKee's story *Not Now, Bernard* (Orchid Classics ORC100115). The present collection of his complete piano music shows that music for or inspired by children runs deeper through his output, whether in the pair of miniatures *Song of the Walnut* and *Song of the Button*, titled from the pet names he and his wife gave their then as yet unborn children (*Cradle Song*, perhaps, speaks for itself), or the *Miniatures* and *Studies*, both intended for young players to get their hands on a wide diversity of musical styles as they strive for Grade 5.

The *Bagatelles* and *Miniatures* were written over a wide period, the earliest pieces dating back to the 1990s; the *Bagatelles* took their final form in 2004, the *Miniatures* only in 2020. Unsurprisingly, both sets feel like fairly arbitrary collections rather than cycles, whereas the *Partita contrafacta* (2022) is more coherent, a set of seven reworkings of Baroque composers – including Bach, Handel and Purcell, framed by the Couperins – that collectively recast Baroque sources in wholly 21st-century postmodernist terms. Written specially for this recording and long-term collaborator Matthew Mills, this is the high point of the programme.

While broadly tonal in design, Hughes's music is not averse to more aggressive or hostile styles: listen to the vibrant third and fifth *Bagatelles*, for example. The composer's chameleon-like stylistic diversity can make for an impression of anonymity, even in the larger-scale *Strettos and Striations* (2021), Hughes's biggest piano work at some 10 minutes. Matthew Mills performs throughout with virtuosity and undeniable understanding of the idiom, and Divine Art's sound is first-rate.

GUY RICKARDS

Messiaen Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus
Kristoffer Hyldig *pf*
OUR Recordings 6 220677/8 (2 SACDs)

Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus* has always provoked a mixed response. For some it remains an epic of spiritual contemplation; for others it is shamelessly self-indulgent. For Messiaen the repetition of leitmotifs, whether simple or elevated, is an inducement to awe and fear of the ultimate, and Kristoffer Hyldig meets every demand with all the necessary spirit of devotion. He captures the cloudy mystery of the opening 'Regard du Père', the ironically pagan-sounding 'Regard de l'Esprit de joie', the orgiastic clangour of 'Noël' (a memory of 'Lavapiés' from Albéniz's *Iberia*; for Messiaen Albéniz was 'parmi les étoiles') and most impressively of all the timeless beauty of 'Le baiser de l'Enfant-Jésus', where sheer poetry transcends religious fervour. Even alongside Steven Osborne's superb recording and Bertrand Chamayou's recent account, as well as, of course, Yvonne Loriod's naturally authentic account, Kristoffer Hyldig takes his place among the *Regards*' finest interpreters.

BRYCE MORRISON

Scriabin 'Visionary and Poet'
Allegro de concert, Op 18; Étude, Op 2 No 1; Twelve Études, Op 8; Fantasy, Op 28; Two Impromptus, Op 12; Six Preludes, Op 13
Daniela Roma *pf*
Dynamic CDS7984

Daniela Roma's Scriabin is far removed from the early, scabrous attacks that befell this turbulent and neurotic genius. Today, admiration outweighs disparagement, and Daniela Roma joins a range of pianists for whom Scriabin's journey from his early Chopin-inspired works to the dark necromancy of his later years goes far beyond oddity or idiosyncrasy. Concentrating on Scriabin's early, unmistakably Russian works, she excels in the heated and grandly rhetorical passions of the B minor Fantasy and – a rarity – the *Allegro de concert*. Elsewhere she is disappointingly subdued in the C sharp minor Étude, Op 2 No 1, and misses something of the soaring lyricism at the heart of the Third of the Op 8 Études, while the D sharp minor final Étude quickly loses momentum and intensity. This is playing that is admirable on one level and limited on another. Overall, you will need to look elsewhere for greater conviction, from such dyed-in-the wool Scriabinists as Ashkenazy, Gavrilov and most of all the imitable Horowitz.

BRYCE MORRISON

Scriabin Sonatas Nos 2-4; Fantasy, Op 28; Vers la flamme, Op 72; Poèmes, Opp 32 & 63; Morceaux, Op 57
Yoojung Kim *pf*
Bridge BRIDGE9578

Korean-born Yoojung Kim studied at the Menuhin School with Nikolai Demidenko and Ruth Nye, completing her training at the RCM and in America at the Manhattan School of Music and NYU Steinhardt (where she now teaches). This Scriabin conspectus, recorded in 2019, is a bold visiting card. Her tone is full, her clarity precision-sharp. Chords and textures unfold cinematically, running passages scorching the ether. Oratory is key. If this means the poetics, the aphoristic sighs of the gentler miniatures speak more than they might dream then so be it. Driven harmonic tensions, crescendo upon crescendo, climax after climax underpin the sonatas and the Op 28 Fantasy – an iron-forged, neon-bright journey that celebrates Scriabin's neurotic, explosive, erotically charged world. Pushing decibels and Steinway hard, tuning especially, the force, terror and inferno of *Vers la flamme*, the Earth consumed in the flames of its own heat (Horowitz's interpretation) – tempo-wise more Richter than Sofronitsky – isn't for the faint-hearted. Velvet-gloved, hot-house Scriabin this emphatically is not. The 'orchestral' muscularity of the engineering goes with the upfront approach.

ATEŞ ORGA

'Après un rêve'
Includes works by Chaminade, Debussy, Duparc, Fauré, Poulenc, Ravel and Saint-Saëns
Emmanuel Despax *pf*
Signum SIGCD747

Emmanuel Despax opens this dream-filled evocation of *La belle époque* with his own take on Fauré's 'Après un rêve', a texturally luxuriant transcription that lies midway between Grainger's relatively straightforward adaptation and Earl Wild's extravagant fancy. With his patience, his sensuous tonal palate and his ability to light on precisely the right bittersweet balance of ardour and regret, Despax carefully establishes our expectations of what's to come.

He then upends them. Poulenc's *Soirées de Nazelles*, which follows, brings out radically different interpretative sympathies. Poulenc began composing it when he and Prokofiev were spending time together playing bridge; and while this set of loose variations occasionally dips into Poulenc's patented chic sentimentality, Prokofiev's skittishness is a more significant presence. Despax is as responsive to Poulenc's sharp angles and quick shifts in affect as he is to Fauré's curves and sustained emotional trajectory.

And so it goes throughout this kaleidoscopic collection, which interleaves large works with small, canonical favourites with the unfamiliar, piano originals with transcriptions. Despax can transform his sound and his outlook with remarkable dexterity; and whatever the spirit of the music – the calm radiance of Duparc's transcription of 'Aux étoiles', the malice-laced sizzle of Horowitz's sly embellishments of the Saint-Saëns-Liszt *Danse macabre*, the plush innocence of Chaminade's Nocturne – he conveys it with confidence and, when necessary, bravura (check out Ravel's 'Scarbo', frighteningly detailed).

One caveat: as on his other recordings, Despax's tempos are slow, sometimes *very* slow. Some listeners – perhaps those who grew itchy during his Brahms First Concerto (Signum SIGCD666) – may not be persuaded. To my ears, though, his control of tension through phrasing, dynamics and rubato is so acute that the music never sags. Thus he stretches Ravel's 'Ondine' as far as any pianist I know; but he builds so perceptively to the paradoxical denouement – Ondine's desolation followed by her final flash of mockery – that I didn't notice the time passing.

The engineering is excellent. The lengthy booklet includes Bryce Morrison's illuminating notes, a brief essay in which Despax frames the repertoire in terms of his personal and family history, and an apposite collection of poetry (some by his grandfather and great grand-uncle).

PETER J RABINOWITZ

'Reminiscence'
Includes works by Kreisler, Liszt, Rachmaninov, Schumann, Scriabin and Tchaikovsky
Simon Bürki *pf*
Aparté AP317

For his debut recording, the 23-year-old Swiss pianist Simon Bürki has chosen a homage to Rachmaninov on the occasion of his 150th birthday. Bürki has the makings of an expert Rachmaninov interpreter. His ability to sustain a long line and release protean surges of energy while maintaining clarity in dense textures are everywhere

evident. The tempestuous first *Étude-tableau* of Op 39 emerges as a vast canvas depicting varied terrain. The fourth bristles with energy and rhythmic élan. If the most famous of the set, the fifth in E flat minor, strikes as somewhat pressured, its mighty *fortissimos* never threaten to overwhelm. In the windswept eighth, Bürki lovingly conjures a gentler mood.

The final two Preludes of Op 32 are no less richly evocative in their own realms. No 12 chillingly evokes bells, while No 13 seems ready to explode in sheer ecstasy. Rachmaninov's transcription of the *Liebesleid* by his friend and chamber-music partner Fritz Kreisler is tossed off with a Viennese *Schwung* that successfully skirts anything cloying. 'Lilacs', the composer's transcription of the fifth of his Op 21 *Romances*, is in Bürki's hands a sensual gem, while the 'Vocalise', heard here in Zoltán Kocsis's transcription, speaks with unaffected simplicity.

The Liszt, Scriabin and Tchaikovsky pieces all are distinctively individual, though Schumann's 'In der Nacht', were it not so well known, might be mistaken for Rachmaninov. Bürki is a native of St Gallen in Switzerland, but he studied with Rada Zagorskaya and Borys Fedorov in Kyiv, and later had lessons in Moscow before working with Sergei Babayan at Juilliard. In time, let's hope his Russian training blends with rather than obscures his own cultural roots. I look forward to hearing more from this talented pianist.

PATRICK RUCKER

'Revival'
Margaret Bonds Spiritual Suite
Florence Price Piano Sonata; Fantasie nègre Nos 1, 2 & 4
Michelle Cann *pf*
Curtis Studio PLAT18088

The Florence Price revival has yet to run its course, with more and more distinctive musicians coming to bat on her behalf, including the pianist Michelle Cann. Cann is no stranger to Price's music: she gave the premiere of the *Piano Concerto in One Movement*, which she has recorded (on Avie), and has also made a terrific recording of the Piano Quintet in A minor with the Catalyst Quartet (Azica Records). Cann opens her solo debut album with Price's three-movement Piano Sonata in E minor, where the composer's organic fusion of African American Spiritual melodies and late Romantic pianism flowers at full capacity. Imagine a combination of Rachmaninov's swirling piano textures and Dvořák's tuneful spontaneity, and you'll get the gist of the opening movement.

The central *Andante* proves to be the sonata's emotional core, with its gorgeous harmonic invention and subtle textural deployment. Using themes from the first movement, the Scherzo finale begins with scampering lightness, only to gather orchestral power and seriousness of purpose as the music progresses. Cann consistently channels her considerable virtuosity towards musical ends, and her interpretation proves far more incisive and varied in scope than the earlier recordings from Cole Burger and Kirsten Johnson. Her Scherzo, for example is livelier and suppler, although I prefer the animation and inflected intensity that Althea Waites brought to her interpretation of the *Andante*.

It's equally fascinating to compare the patience and deliberation with which Cann shapes the more introspective and rhetorical portions of the *Fantasie nègre* movements alongside Lara Downes's bristling extroversion or Samantha Ege's long-lined continuity in No 1. One might say that Cann is like Jorge Bolet alongside Downes's Earl Wild. Likewise, in Margaret Bonds's *Spiritual Suite*, Downes plays the opening 'Valley of the Bones' faster and straighter than Cann's more rhapsodic reading. In 'The Bells' I prefer Cann's quicker pace and greater textural contrasts over Ege's more generalised traversal. Once past a dry and matter-of-fact opening to 'Troubled Water', Cann relaxes into the central major-key section, giving the Rachmaninov-like chords plenty of breathing room. Although the way Cann whips up the tempo three minutes in is superficially exciting, I feel that this misses the point of the music's solo/chorus call-and-response. Indeed, I've yet to encounter a recording of 'Troubled Water' that conveys the breadth and dignified gravitas behind the notes. Excellent annotations and sonics.

JED DISTLER

Tanya Ekanayaka 18 Piano Sutras; 25 South Asian Pianisms
Tanya Ekanayaka *pf*
Naxos World NXW76163-2 (2 CDs)

Tanya Ekanayaka's new double album is her most ambitious project yet, and strives to blend the rhythms and melodies not just of her native Sri Lanka but of a wider Asian hinterland within a Western idiom in two large cycles composed during 2021-22: the *18 Piano Sutras* and the less elegantly titled *25 South Asian Pianisms* (which closes with an 'Ode to South Asia'). The 43 individual pieces in the cycles cover no fewer than 40 separate languages and while there is no attempt to describe any linguistic characteristics, the composer has sought 'to honour the various languages (together with the songs within which they reside), and their communities, through the compositions which have, in part, been inspired by them'.

A sutra – the Sanskrit word can be translated as thread or skein – is normally defined as an often-aphoristic literary text, usually but not exclusively of religious or academic intent; Ekanayaka's set of purely musical sutras has no overt didactic purpose. The prevailing style is firmly in the Western classical tradition, rooted in Chopin and turn-of-the-20th-century French composers such as, say, Fauré or Debussy (though without sounding overtly like any of these). The rippling textures that open many of the pieces show the Francophile influence very well.

There are more forceful movements, as with *Sutras* Nos 9 ('Ekitala') and 13 ('Kandaani'), while No 15 ('Uvhendza') has a really engaging, jazz-nocturnal feel to it; the 11th *Pianism*, 'Lewa', is similar. Most imaginative and atmospheric of all is 'Cirai' (*Pianism* No 20), a really beguiling miniature tone poem. Unfortunately, too many of these pieces meander somewhat and heard en masse they lose their individuality. Ekanayaka plays them very nicely and is equally well recorded.

GUY RICKARDS

PIANO CONCERTOS

Ichmouratov Viola Concerto No 1 in G minor, Op 7; Piano Concerto, Op 40
Jean-Philippe Sylvestre *pf*
Elvira Misbakhova *viola*
London Symphony Orchestra / Airat Ichmouratov
Chandos CHSA5281

After releases of his chamber and orchestral music, Chandos furthers its coverage of the Volga-Tatar-born Canadian composer Airat Ichmouratov (50 this year) with a coupling of concertos whose neo-Romantic idiom is appealing whatever its derivativeness.

With its nod to Bartók at the outset, the Piano Concerto's opening movement passes across a range of ideas contrasted in motion and scoring yet characterised by an expressive uniformity that enables the composer to build an elaborate structure without need for thematic evolution as such – even if the midpoint cadenza, with its steadily mounting virtuosity, provides a degree of formal focus. Emerging gradually on strings, the slow movement sets out a rapt dialogue, solo woodwind much in evidence, and makes up in atmosphere what it lacks in substance. The finale launches with some style, and if momentum tends to falter thereafter, the dexterity of its exchanges keeps the listener engaged as the movement heads towards a decisive conclusion.

The First Viola Concerto's dramatic start sets up the soloist for an *Andante* whose folk- and chant-like facets add a welcome cohesion. Marked 'Recitativo', the central *Largo* expounds a lengthy soliloquy whose sombre emotion is maintained through the ensuing dialogue with its chiming climax and pensive close. With its relative brevity and tensile rhythmic undertow, the final *Allegro* nimbly pursues a purposeful and klezmer-inflected course.

That Jean-Philippe Sylvestre and Elvira Misbakhova have both edited their solo parts says a great deal for their advocacy, with the London Symphony Orchestra never less than attentive. Spacious but well-defined sound and extensive notes (Arthur Kaptainis) contribute to an enjoyable album.

RICHARD WHITEHOUSE

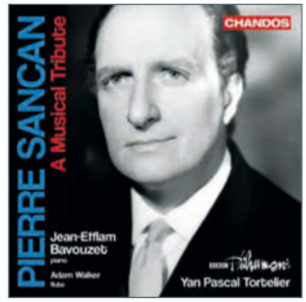
Mozart Piano Concertos Nos 15-17, K450, 451 & 453
Clare Huangci *pf*
Mozarteumorchester Salzburg / Howard Griffiths
Alpha ALPHA928

Claire Huangci isn't the newest of Howard Griffiths's Next Generation Mozart Soloists. In fact she already has a fairly hefty discography dating back over a decade and ranging from Scarlatti to Kabalevsky. There are even a couple of collaborations with Griffiths in 18th- and 19th-century repertoire – wherein lies a major clue to the naturalness of their musical relationship and their palpable affinity in these concertos from the spring of 1784.

The D major Concerto, No 16 (K451) opens proceedings, the grandeur of its introduction, bedecked with trumpets and drums, giving way to Huangci's richly voiced Steinway. She revels in the fingery brilliance of the faster music, investing this opening movement with a nervous energy, but also deploying a range of touches and articulations that respond acutely to Mozart's quicksilver changes of mood. That combination of perceptiveness and technical command easily places this among the most enjoyable recent recordings of this repertoire. The opening movement of the B flat Concerto, No 15 (K450), bubbles infectiously, and finales are gleefully buoyant and spirited. Slow movements are kept moving: if any criticism is to be made, it might be that one or two others find a greater degree of repose. All the same, Huangci and Griffiths ensure they never become flabby or freighted with an ersatz emotionality they're not designed to take.

The programme concludes with the G major Concerto, No 17 (K453), the best-known of the three works, played once again with innate insight and impeccable judgement. The soloist's forlorn D minor entry in the central *Andante* is one special moment among many, and Griffiths and his Salzburg orchestra accompany with sensitivity throughout – as you might expect for a band with the composer's name in their title.

DAVID THREASHER



Pierre Sancan 'A Musical Tribute'
Jean-Efflam Bavouzet *pf*
Adam Walker *flute*
BBC Philharmonic / Yan Pascal Tortelier
Chandos CHAN20154

In 2004 EMI released Jean-Philippe Collard's Ankara recording of Pierre Sancan's Piano Concerto (1947-55). So good was the work – a pageant of refined colours, big pianism, acid streams and spiky, shadowy corners, Ravel, Ibert and Milhaud in the playground – one could only wonder at its neglect. Growing up in Morocco, Sancan (1916-2008) studied with Yves Nat and was a consummate pianist in his own right. He taught at the Paris Conservatoire from 1956 to 1985, among his students Michel Béroff, Jean-Philippe Collard, Jean-Bernard Pommier and Jean-Efflam Bavouzet.

Lionel Esparza points out in his booklet essay that 'without question [he was] born a little too late in a century of huge upheavals'; he was uncomfortable with the pressures of performing and the emergence of a post-war avant-garde led him to abandon composition. Bavouzet recalls him as 'a sunny, radiant character who, through his music, his kindness, his openness and largeness of spirit, his passion for sharing his knowledge, inspired and enlightened'. His output he quantifies as 'half-straightforward, half-sophisticated, of irresistibly delicious charm and high erudition'. Besides the Concerto (premiered under Cluytens, 28 minutes against Collard's 37) and some miniatures, this timely album adds the more familiar Flute Sonatina (a decade before Poulenc's, contemporary with Sancan's score to Jacqueline Audry's lost *Les malheurs de Sophie*) plus an arresting Symphony for strings (1961). Excellent production values.

ATEŞ ORGA

Book Review

Rachmaninov's years in America are the subject of a new biographical study

TULLY POTTER COLLECTION

Goodbye Russia: Rachmaninoff in Exile
Fiona Maddocks
Faber & Faber, 360 pages

As Fiona Maddocks states in her preface, this book is neither a piece of musicology nor a straightforward biography. It's a 'set of impressions and excursions' that focuses on Rachmaninov's period in exile in America, and seeks the keys both to his personality and to his art, as both pianist and composer. And in this quest the book is very successful.

'What would he be like to know?' Maddocks asks. She spells Rachmaninov's name the way the composer himself did once he'd settled in America – which is contrary to the house styles of both *International Piano* and *The Observer*, for whom Maddocks has long been the classical music critic. More generally, she gathers evidence from interviews, letters, memoirs and newspapers.

'His voice is deep and crackles drily like snapping dead wood,' wrote the *Daily Herald* of Rachmaninov. 'His eyes are dark and far away. He seems like a sardonic ghost from a past generation.' 'A six-and-a-half-foot-tall scowl' was the famous quip by Stravinsky, with whom Rachmaninov had a cautious, mutually circling relationship in California. His fellow expatriate Prokofiev, a waspish rival, described his walk onstage as 'a sort of sidelong, hesitating shuffle that makes you wonder if he is ever going to make it to the piano.'

Once there he entranced almost everyone. In 1919 the American music journal *The Etude* devoted a whole issue to him, describing his music as 'simple, sincere, earnest, intense, granite in strength, yet fern-like in delicacy'. The British critic Neville Cardus wrote of his playing of Beethoven's *Moonlight* Sonata: 'cloud and sunshine over the valley is not more soft and changeful than Rachmaninoff's light and shade, achieved by sensitive pedalling'. And Cardus extolled his hands: 'The fingers curve and hover and sweep and dance; every supple finger is individual, every note in a harmony is alive and personal. He plays entirely with his fingers and his feet; the rest of his body is amazingly still.'

Moody, diffident and depressive, Rachmaninov was also compulsively generous and intermittently clubbable, loving to be made to laugh until the tears rolled down his cheeks by his chum Feodor Chaliapin. He was also a speed-freak, racing round America in a succession of giant Lincolns and Packards, over whose maintenance he fussed like a doting and anxious parent. Very rich indeed, in America he was feted like royalty.

But the main sweep of this story is an underlying tragedy, as Rachmaninov says goodbye to his beloved Ivanovka estate – over which he presided as an enlightened landowner – and tries to replicate something of its quality in his Villa Senar on the shores of Lake Lucerne. But the attempt was hopeless: everything from the air of the steppe to the ritual and mythology of the Russian Orthodox Church pulled him irresistibly back in memory. As *The New Yorker* put it in 1926, he was 'austere, solitary, aristocratic, morosely sensitive and simple', and homeless after his wrench from Russia.

Which is why he sought solace in an expatriate cocoon. Maddocks shows how 'Russia Abroad' sprang up almost overnight in New York, leaving its imprint on streets, shops, cafes, theatres and above all churches. Rachmaninov was one of several musicians

who made donations to Christ the Savior Russian Orthodox Church in New York when it was founded in 1924.

In Russia, Rachmaninov had been part of a *fin de siècle* group of artists, actors, writers and musicians who embodied the Silver Age – including Anton Chekhov, Ilya Repin, Alexander Glazunov and Alexander Scriabin – and in America he attempted to replicate that. Fritz Kreisler, Nathan Milstein and Josef Hofmann were his closest musical friends, with Vladimir Horowitz his favourite duet partner. When the Second World War broke out they all gave their beleaguered compatriots what financial help they could; Rachmaninov supported the establishment of a Tolstoy Foundation to assist Russian refugees in Central Europe. He was also a devoted family man, very close to his pianist-cousin Alexander Siloti, devoted to his pianist-wife Natalia, and worrying constantly about his widowed daughter and granddaughter when they were trapped in Vichy France.

Although almost all of Rachmaninov's major works predated the Russian Revolution, Maddocks writes illuminatingly about the genesis of the music he composed in exile. She thinks there may be some truth in the suggestion that he used his ferociously busy performance schedule as an excuse for his fallow periods as a composer. He had made 1457 appearances as a pianist by the end of his career, 1189 of which were during his exile. He was a lifelong Steinway artist, and often sent four of their pianos ahead when on tour. His usual repertoire included Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Schumann, Grieg, Daquin and Weber, as well as works by his friend Nikolay Medtner. The notorious C sharp minor Prelude, which his American audiences always wanted to hear, hung round his neck like an albatross. Sometimes he refused to play it; other times he relented.

Rachmaninov liked to practise alone and unheard, but it was observed that he used a metronome, and spent long hours in very slow practice. But when composing, sustained by tobacco, he couldn't touch the piano: 'When composing I am a slave. Beginning at nine in the morning, I allow myself no respite until after eleven at night.' A reminiscence by the daughter of the composer Henry Cowell, who showed Rachmaninov one of his compositions, provides a charming glimpse of how his mind worked. Rachmaninov examined the piece closely and at length. Then he gently put a tiny red circle round 41 notes and handed it back to Cowell. 'There are 41 wrong notes in your composition,' he said. 'They are not within the rules of harmony … These are divine rules. I too, when I was a boy, sometimes wrote wrong notes.'

Fiona Maddocks's companionable prose makes an invigorating and at times very moving read, and her historical and biographical digressions greatly enrich the narrative. Was Rachmaninov, as has often been alleged, a dyed-in-the-wool conservative? This book has many pointers to a more nuanced view. Yes, he found his voice early and stuck to it, and the sound of bells and the *Dies irae* chant did indeed obsess him until his dying day. He may have been resistant to Shostakovich's music, and claimed repeatedly that he was 'organically incapable' of understanding the music of modernism, yet he was mad about Art Tatum's extraordinary improvisations.

For Rachmaninov, life was pianism first and last. And it is aptly significant that he should have designated Emil Gilels – that paragon of the purest musicality – as his pianistic successor. He presented Gilels with the medal engraved with the profile of Anton Rubinstein that he himself had once received, a symbol of his place in the line of descent from the great Russian master.

MICHAEL CHURCH

Live Reviews

LONDON

Wigmore Hall
Alexander Gavrylyuk 11 May
Nikolai Lugansky 18 May
András Schiff 20 & 22 May

András Schiff's appearances at Wigmore Hall now take place without a programme announced in advance. This may be a fruit of the pandemic, but they've evolved as an art form that pleases their audience so much that it's hard to imagine the series ever being discontinued. Two concerts given in quick succession in May were both sold out, and both were ecstatically acclaimed. The basic pattern is always the same: Schiff comes on, sits down without a word and plays, and then spins out a two-hour monologue (punctuated by an interval). In this, his jokingly avuncular commentary linked musical performances that, although it felt as though he was playing for himself, revealed pianism of a very high order.

Schiff shared the stage with a fortepiano as well as a piano, the latter forming the focus for the first hour with vivid accounts of Beethoven's *Tempest* and Op 78 sonatas. I had never heard the *Allegretto* of the *Tempest* so gently paced yet at the same time so vividly dramatic. In between these works he played Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*, linking it to the sonatas with a rather tenuous argument about Beethoven's debt to Bach.

During the interval the fortepiano was wheeled centre stage. After praising its health-giving sound – pitched a smidgen lower than the modern piano and capable of much greater softness – Schiff put it through its paces with a performance of Beethoven's Op 126 Bagatelles that electrifyingly ran the whole gamut of human emotion from dreamy to diabolical. Then he played Beethoven's E major Sonata, Op 109, twice – first on the modern piano, then on the earlier instrument; at moments it seemed more satisfactory on the piano but at others the fortepiano seemed to uncover beauties of a different sort.

The second evening began on the piano with a magnificent Fugue from Bach's *Musical Offering*, followed by a rumination on the excellence of the composer's *Two-Part Inventions*: 'They are very dear to me', Schiff told us. 'At 16 you should jettison Czerny and stick to Bach. I remember Kurtág telling me that I would always come back to these great works – and here I am doing that.' Indeed: he played all 15 with gusto, before taking us back into his rumination about the relative virtues of the piano and fortepiano. Exhibit A: the complete *Waldstein* Sonata played on the piano; Exhibit B: the same work on the fortepiano. Same result: at times one seemed better, at other times the other. Finally, to drive his point home, he rattled through the most demonic of the Bagatelles, delivering everything from *fortissimo* rage to *pianissimo* whisper. This evening was a workout for us as well as for him, and of the most enjoyable kind.

MARCO BORGGREVE

High drama: Alexander Gavrylyuk fused virtuosity and poetry

A row of lollipops strung in any old order and a pianist with whom I wasn't familiar – I confess my hopes weren't high for Alexander Gavrylyuk's Wigmore recital. Born in Ukraine in 1984 and moving to Australia when he was 13, Gavrylyuk enjoyed youthful glory by winning the Horowitz Competition at the age of 15, the Hamamatsu the following year and the Arthur Rubinstein Competition in 2005. He has made a number of recordings including several for Piano Classics, but apart from a well-received performance of Rachmaninov's Third Concerto at the BBC Proms in 2017, he's had little concert profile in Britain. But the Wigmore Hall was full, so he clearly has a following.

Gavrylyuk's opening gambit was anything but auspicious: the first movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight* Sonata was delivered with noisy ponderousness as though searching for effects. But the *Allegretto* was nicely turned, and the finale rushed along in a fine fury. What, I wondered uneasily, would he do with the next work, Schumann's *Kinderszenen*? Interesting things, it turned out. 'Von fremden Ländern und Menschen' emerged dreamily, catching its breath with hesitant little rubatos, and 'Kuriose Geschichte' sang playfully. 'Hasche-Mann' became a lively gallop and the entreating child was urgently expressive. Each cameo had its own vivid character and its own sound world: the rocking-horse rider exuded *fortissimo* magnificence, while the nightmare vision in 'Fürchtenmachen' came and went subliminally fast. The effects were finely calculated, and there was nothing twee in this evocation of childhood as Gavrylyuk harnessed every weapon in his big instrument's armoury.

Then came fireworks with Liszt's 'Tarantella' from *Venezia e Napoli*, a sparkling piece that Gavrylyuk infused with high drama at high velocity, deploying by turns massive power and exquisite delicacy, and producing, like a magician, a constant stream of brightly coloured effects. Now we could see what this Ukrainian-Australian pianist was really about: there was no vanity in his pianism, just a search for poetry with the virtuosity required to express it.

The rest of the programme was unalloyed pleasure, with more surprises along the way. In Chopin's D flat major Nocturne, Op 27 No 2, the sustained melody was deeply felt and gracefully communicated, while the A major Polonaise, Op 40 No 1, was delivered with heel-clicking smartness. On then to Brahms's Op 117 Intermezzos: the B flat minor No 2 spoke from the heart while the C sharp minor No 3 received a bigger-boned account than usual.

Then it was back to party time, with Liszt's arrangement of Saint-Saëns's *Danse macabre*. This is a preposterously difficult work to play but Gavrylyuk made light of it, drawing out its crazy theatricality and winding up with a sequence of effects so irresistibly comic that the audience gasped and laughed. And that was it. I can't remember a shorter Wigmore recital, nor one so unexpected. Gavrylyuk played one encore – the least showy of all Chopin's Études, but also one of the most beautiful, the E flat minor Op 10 No 6. This is a very serious artist, who for some reason enjoys challenging us not to take him seriously.

A week later, also at Wigmore Hall, Nikolai Lugansky – long established as a leading exponent of Rachmaninov's music – brought a magisterial touch to the composer's *Moments musicaux*, Op 16, Second Piano Sonata and Op 32 Preludes. Lugansky's programme note was apt: the melodic lines of his 'musical moments', he wrote, 'belong to a genre we might call "urban romance". We hear the same language in many of Tchaikovsky's works, music sung from the heart, from the depths of the soul, among the urban intelligentsia, the minor nobility.' And that is how their unforced lyricism and intermittent fury came over, while the concentrated virtuosity of the B flat minor Sonata rang to the heavens.

MICHAEL CHURCH

YUTAKA SUZUKI

András Schiff impressed on both a modern piano and a fortepiano

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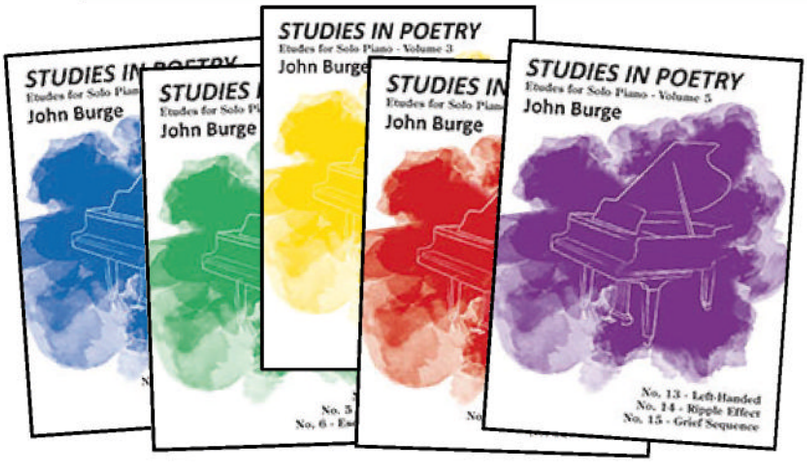


Burge
Studies in Poetry
Études for Solo Piano,
Volumes 1-5
Red Leaf Pianoworks
www.redleafpianoworks.com

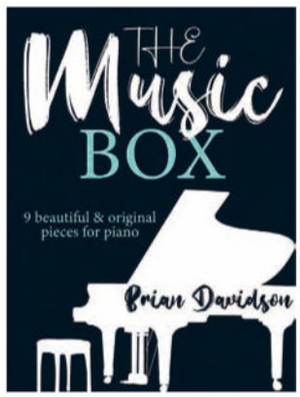
The distinguished Canadian composer John Burge (born 1961) has written prolifically for the piano over many decades. His music marries originality and boldness of conception with accessibility and immediacy to a most impressive degree. His compositional approach varies between passages that take traditional tonality as a springboard to writing that is cutting-edge and iconoclastic.

John Burge has composed prolifically for the piano

But throughout, Burge is never less than consistently practical: pianists will surely appreciate his craftsmanship and emphasis on presenting music that works well at the keyboard, usually affording a gratifying sense of tactile pleasure.

Burge's most recent series of some 15 concert études brings together solo piano studies that were written between 2001 and 2022. These were directly inspired by the work of vibrant but vividly contrasted poets that the composer clearly found intensely moving on a personal level. The result is a most impressive bravura cycle that could prove hugely attractive to performers seeking substantial yet approachable contemporary repertoire. On the one hand there are quasi-minimalistic numbers such as 'Loop' (Étude No 4, inspired by the poetry of Anne Simpson) or ferociously percussive essays such as 'Til my fingers bleed' (Étude No 1, after Charles Bukowski) and 'Ballistics' (Étude No 12, after Billy Collins). On the other hand there is touching poetry, even a hint of sentimentality, in the likes of 'Anthem' (Étude No 8, after Helen Humphreys) as well as a hint towards jazz in 'Riffs' (Étude No 3, after Dennis Lee). In terms of duration, Burge's études vary considerably. Several are quite substantial, almost outgrowing the title of 'study', but at 365 bars long perhaps the Bach Chaconne-influenced 'Grief Sequence' (Étude No 15, after Prageeta Sharma) dwarfs all the others. This is a quasi-symphonic work – a moving essay in concentrated power, a tone poem without orchestra rather than a conventional étude. It was written during the isolated days of the Covid lockdowns and its powerfully austere characterisation reflects the loneliness of that time.

These studies could well be presented collectively – indeed, numbers 1-12 form a convincing cycle in their own right – but the individual études equally stand alone as strongly characterised independent pieces.



Davidson
The Music Box: nine beautiful and original pieces for piano
Kevin Mayhew 3612640

Brian Davidson is a Scottish pedagogue, pianist and composer based near Edinburgh who has had vast experience not only as a teacher, but also as an ABRSM examiner. Clearly his wide-ranging educational endeavours have had a positive effect on the music presented in this cycle, which leaps off the page in terms of its pianistic layout, characterisation and melodic memorability. I am especially impressed by the central three elegies, which opt for contrasted tessituras and pitch centres, with the second elegy melodically exploiting the tenor range of the instrument while the left hand crosses over the right with some enticing pianism, all in only 20 bars. This is an outstanding miniature with orchestral overtones that adds considerably to the music's intensity. 'The Music Box' proves to be a worthy Celtic counterpart to Liadov's famous 'A Musical Snuffbox' from Imperial Russia.

There is much humour here, as well as many useful pianistic workouts, such as in the staccatos, tremolandos and double-note figurations in 'The Mischievous Mosquito'. By contrast, 'Lullaby for Lara' floats away serenely and exquisitely with an inner right-hand melody and gentle extended accompanimental arpeggios. Davidson is a stickler for details on the score, providing elegant and thoughtful articulation marks and directions on a macro and micro scale in persuasive numbers such as 'Perfect Story' and the opening 'Morris Dance' (a 21st-century homage to Percy Grainger, perhaps?). All told, this is a most varied, persuasive and approachable mini-anthology of intermediate-level pieces that will be of value to many players. I think adult players returning to the piano in particular should find this collection inspiring and rewarding.

BY MURRAY McLACHLAN

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International Piano

NEXT ISSUE SEPTEMBER 2023

HAOCHEN ZHANG

The 2009 winner of the Cliburn Competition and a huge star in China, Hoachen Zhang's profile in the West is more modest, despite a recording contract with the Swedish label BIS. We talk to him about musical life and his new recording of Liszt's daunting but seemingly irresistible *Études d'exécution transcendante*

VLADIMIR HOROWITZ

Bryce Morrison examines the extraordinary impact Horowitz had on 20th-century pianism and a legacy that still divides opinion

GODOWSKY'S SYMPHONIC METAMORPHOSES ON DIE FLEDERMAUS

Jeremy Nicholas explores Godowsky's pianistic elaboration on themes from Johann Strauss's operetta and traces its history on record, from Anatole Kitain to Marc-André Hamelin

INTERVIEW BY JEREMY NICHOLAS

Musical honesty and entertainment

Kenneth Hamilton recalls a handful of recordings that have shaped his relationship with music, from Wagner to Florence Foster Jenkins

I chose all these recordings a) because I remember when I first heard them and b) because they introduced a new sound world to me either through the composition or the performance or both.

I was about 13 or 14. My mother had been on holiday somewhere and she bought me a Wagner selection as a present. Orchestral versions of extracts from the operas. I don't know why. I don't think she knew what else to give me, but I was so captivated that I bought the Solti recording of *Das Rheingold*. Just from the very first note it transports you into another world, age, time and planet. It's astonishing. Ever since then I've been a massive Wagner fan. Each opera takes you bodily somewhere else. I bought the recording myself by saving my school lunch money. I don't know how many sandwiches I didn't have as a result, but *Rheingold* was the first because it was the shortest and therefore the cheapest! I used to play the vocal scores of the Wagner operas in the front room in my teens and sing the baritone parts really badly. I still do. I'm the worst Wotan in the world. Which will bring me to my final choice!

I met the pianist Ian Pace in Oxford – I think he'd just arrived at Queen's [College] – and he'd somehow got hold of this Horowitz in Carnegie Hall concert and said I had to listen to it. I didn't know much about Horowitz then and I was utterly bowled over by it – the sonority, the sound world, the sense of passion. This must have made the same impact that Liszt had in 1845 or whenever. I didn't know the piano could sound like this. He simplifies certain bits but the octaves at the end are phenomenal, like a machine gun, and it transports you back to when you could be stunned by piano-playing. It's like a panic attack.

I never heard Horowitz live, but I heard Gilels several times in Glasgow when I was growing up. He played the *Emperor* Concerto and the *Waldstein* Sonata and a few other things. Two things I noticed: on two different pianos he always produced this golden tone, very even, 24-carat gold; the second thing was the insouciance and ease and calmness. That's what comes over in his performance of the Bach-Siloti Prelude. Again, it's transcendental – but in a different way to Horowitz – the simplicity of it and this sense of time standing still. With Horowitz you feel that time is rushing ahead to some sort of Armageddon. With Gilels it is like the embodiment of Zen Buddhism in that piece. It isn't necessarily the most perceptive interpretation but more this sense of mastery.

I like both of Hamelin's recordings of the Alkan Concerto for Solo Piano, but it was the first one that really made the impact. Again, it was revelatory. Hugh Macdonald had been one of my tutors and wrote the *Grove* article on Alkan, and he tried to get me interested in Alkan. It didn't do anything for me. I looked through the score of the Concerto and thought it was nonsense, ridiculous. Then a friend asked me if I had heard Hamelin's recording and said I had to listen to it. I thought 'Wow!' It completely bowled me over. I had never heard Alkan played with such mastery and drive and rhythmic accuracy. The first movement totally amazed me. That's why I learnt the Concerto myself. Hamelin opened my eyes to how good the piece is and what a wonderful effect it can make. It's a masterpiece. I can't imagine it being played better than by Hamelin. Differently, yes, but not better.

Music should be entertaining and honest. And if it doesn't capture your attention or have some entertainment value, whether through profundity or amusement, it's basically just boring. Florence Foster Jenkins is one of the few musicians who is never, ever boring. She may be terrible but I've listened to the 'Queen of the Night' and several other things many times, and every time I hear something different and it's worse than I expected. It's not predictable. Suddenly, there's something else that she can't do! The other thing is Cosme McMoon, her pianist, obviously a good musician, desperately trying to keep the show on the road. You feel sorry for them both because Florence's ambition was clearly so much greater than her talent. To get back to Wagner, it's a completely different musical world all of her own. There are so many boring, decent musicians out there who are just good enough but not interesting. Florence is always interesting. I rest my case! **IP**

Wagner
Das Rheingold
George London, Kirsten Flagstad et al, Vienna Philharmonic / Georg Solti
Decca 485 3159

Liszt
Vallée d'Obermann
Vladimir Horowitz *pf*
Sony 88697 83985-2

Bach, arr. Siloti
Prelude in B minor
Emil Gilels *pf*
RCA 88875 17731-2

Alkan
Concerto for Solo Piano
Marc-André Hamelin *pf*
Music & Arts CD0724

Mozart
Queen of the Night's Aria
Florence Foster Jenkins *sop*
Cosme McMoon *pf*
Sony 88883 76600-2

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